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Afterword: pluralisation

This group of chapters addresses the ways in which authorities are established and operate in relation to processes of pluralisation in case-studies drawn from very different cultures, geographical zones and periods. It is, above all, textual sources that are used to reconstruct discourses and practices related to pluralisation. These stretch from classical epic in Angelika Malinar's chapter to reports about church councils in Luise Marion Frenkel's, and from biographical and philosophical texts in the context of subcontinental Sufism as analysed by Amit Dey to language textbooks and marginal notes in Asaph Ben-Tov's chapter on an early modern European teacher of language. Material objects, sometimes bearing inscriptions, sometimes not, have to be added to these sources, as shown by Jörg Rüpke. When oral forms of communication and the diffusion of knowledge are important for religious identities, the very materiality of letters and texts and the problem of accessibility to generic forms are significant (Frenkel, see also Henderson in III.2). Against this background, the dissemination of visual practices and the aesthetics of religious communication through material objects and sites mediate processes of both pluralisation and homogenisation.

   A comparison of the chapters leads to a distinction between different dimensions of pluralisation. The selected cases and approaches suggest starting such differentiation from a basic distinction. What we observe first is the broadening of the range of ways in which participants engage with religion. The mere multiplication of practices used in communicating with the divine, as well as the media used in such activities, need not imply the criticism of existing forms, need not imply crises or even conversion, but opens up the possibility of individual selection on the basis of inclinations or preferences (see also Murphy in I.2). An inhabitant of the ancient Mediterranean might just feel an aesthetic attraction to a new form of votive, a learned man from the early modern period might just be fascinated by an unfamiliar semantics of theistic belief, or an ancient Indian householder might study monotheistic devotional texts while continuing with his polytheistic practices. The observation of such a multiplication might, however, also lead to a more conscious, or even critical, appraisal of what we refer to as the pluralisation of religious practices and beliefs. In particular, polemical innovations, articulating differences between old and new or right or wrong, also mobilise contemporary observers and responses. Spatial proximity among intel-

lectuals of the same city or attentive administrators or weak authorities might make a crucial difference in this respect in so far as it could quickly sharpen such differences and accelerate the formation of groups.

Pluralisation is intimately related to social and economic differences, as many chapters in this publication demonstrate, such as those on differences in degrees and forms of deviance in fourth century BCE Athens or late ancient asceticism (see also Bremmer in IV.1 and Ramelli in III.1). Highly visible temple architecture and quickly buried clay deposits were options available to and congenial for people of very different social and economic positions. In processes of developing or authorising mechanisms of pluralisation, gender, ethnic distinctions and social distinctions turn out to be sensitive issues. While, on the one hand, the pluralisation of religious options gave new opportunities for the excluded to engage with religion, they were, at the same time, met with resistance. Their roles in religion were contested. The debate about such persons offered also an arena, in which contestations of new practices and concepts found a favourite place. While ascetic religion in ancient India opened up pathways for male householders, it is much debated whether this also happened for women. The multiplication of the latter's religious practices was more acceptable when they continued their traditional social roles. A number of female Sufi saints are known but they were never given authorial or foundational roles, other than in the case of certain religious practices that were addressed to their graves. In several cases, male saints acted or were seen as spokespersons for the female saints. Here, *bhakti* traditions seem more accommodating to female initiative, as is attested by the inclusion of women in spiritual lineages in the late medieval period. The characteristic opening up of *bhakti* to social groups otherwise excluded was precarious and marked by phases of canonisation and prolonged closure. The same hold trues for early and late antique Christian and medieval Indian nunneries, as well as European nunneries respectively grouping of female *religiosi* (see also Mulder-Bakker and Ramelli, III.1). All of this is attesting to the diverse historical constellations that either allowed to consolidate female agency or restricted it.

The detailed analyses offered by our chapters make the important point that innovation and change must not be looked for only in specific social groups or positions. Very different positions could emerge even within social or professional, ethnic or denominational, groups which shared interests. Pluralisation – to use this as the overarching term – can be seen as a phenomenon within established groups and frameworks as much as between more clearly articulated groups. It can be internal as well as external.

The gradation of ways in which *bhakti* can be practiced is extremely diverse already in the earliest texts, allowing for intellectual quests or the seeking of

relief from economic suffering. Female sufis could be found in family roles as mothers of sufi saints, thus acting within established lines of tradition, or they could be isolated spiritual personalities themselves (Dey). Late ancient bishops could take very pronounced theological positions, but that did not hinder them to display a large variety of attitudes towards the (again highly diverse) ways, how the population in these bishops' jurisdictional districts lived Christianity on a day to day basis (Frenkel). Such discrepancy can be observed elsewhere. Even the intensive appropriation of Quranic terminology and imagery made the early modern learned Zechendorff never expect his pupils to change their religious allegiances from Christianity to Islam (Ben-Tov). When parameters of orthodoxy exist, the gap between internal variation and heresy is narrow. The fuzziness of shared practices and discourses of Sufism was subject to very different classifications around the fringes of Islam by different actors or observers. It clearly emerges from the chapters in this section that "religions" are lived by their followers in ways that question their norms as closed systems. Religions are lived by individuals and are, accordingly, fragmented (Rüpke).

This also means that authority in religious matters is much more fragmented and contested than is usually assumed. Our chapters suggest that assertions of *religious* authority are intimately related to processes of pluralisation. Not being able to rely on social or political authority, these claims are competitive. Authority is not simply given but is, rather, based on acceptance, with complex discourses dedicated to establishing its criteria. To start with, rhetorical devices are employed to characterise the status, the reliability and the trustworthiness of the self in ego-narratives (Frenkel, see also Henderson, III.2, and Bashir, II.2). Agency in religious pluralisation is, therefore, found in the creation of narratives about the past and its actors, or the description of the characteristics and characters of the present with which new religious practices and concepts, or new combinations of these, can be described as being ancient and traditional, or common, respectively. With different modes of communication, or even of intellection, agents of pluralisation try to establish criteria of plausibility for which the tools of enforcement available to political authorities are not sufficient. Philosophy tries to establish impersonal criteria, epic narrative contextualises the "opinions" of individual "I's" by a faceless or withdrawn narrator. The readerships and audiences, however, know of alternative authorities to those claimed by the texts with which they are confronted (cf. again Henderson and Gordon, IV.1). Different teachers, other saints, and nearby monasteries offer alternatives (Frenkel, see also Ramelli, III.1). Uttering doubts about doctrinal matters also questions authority (see Casteigt and M. Vinzent in II.1). Doubt might be fundamentally endorsed, as, for example, in Indian philosophy, thus engaging with claims that are built only on trust. As such, it could be employed as a medium of

control, in particular in relation to the truth claims about invisible powers and authority built on such truth claims. Other cultures have an ongoing discourse about doubt. This discourse could be fed by the narration of stories about periods and contexts that rigorously excluded doubt, for instance about ancient Athens (see Bremmer, IV.1) or medieval Islam.

Evidently, there are limits to pluralising agency. Again, the contexts limit the social spaces for religious initiative and authority. Setting out on the path of pluralisation through a process of exceptional deviance is a high risk, possibly life-threatening strategy for the agent. The process is ultimately successful when the initiator's deviance establishes an exemplary behaviour as a new norm, extrapolating from former systems of value. The very character of religious authority, that is the claim of tapping an extra-social or trans-local divine source in miracle working or improving ritual and thus proving that you are a "friend of god", is relevant here – with quite different consequences for the various social groups. The renouncing of sexuality is frequently implied, in particular for males. The formulation of authority as an existing group consensus, usually proved by referring back to texts that are claimed to prove the existence of such consensus, is in most scenarios a low-risk form of pluralising agency. Again, the question of whether new groups are thus created or internal splits obliterated, thus hiding internal pluralisation, has been answered differently by each of us.

Religious practices are spatial practices. This fact has remained implicit in our chapters for the most part. Extrapolating from this observation, one can assume that processes of multiplication or pluralisation created new religious spaces in proportion with the frequency of variation. This might start from the small place given to a sacred character by a votive dedication and then intensified by a second such offering. Religious diversity or homogeneity inside houses was visible only to the few inhabitants and occasional visitors. The rise of ascetic homelessness resulted in the increased visibility of many practices. The new religious engagement of individuals in the ancient Mediterranean or in India produced religious bodies in plain sight of many people. Other initiatives led to their visual concealment, with the establishment of various physical sites, such as monasteries, caves, Sufi lodges and tombs, and commemorative spaces, just within walking distance of the traditional households. Sufi saints offered religious services to be applied to new fields; yogic practices rendered the body into an easily reachable but at the same time highly complex micro-topography in need of permanent care.

New religious spaces were not only created by practices but also by texts. These texts themselves changed, when they were brought into new spaces and pronounced or read there. Texts themselves were sites in which quotations of other texts could be found. Pluralisation meant that the topography of religious

sites became much more complex and polyvalent, a phenomenon that did not apply only in urban contexts. Mosques, as highly controlled spaces, could be supplemented and even contested by shrines. Moving from one space to the other could involve significant shifts in religious identity or authority. These could be related to social or gender roles: the child who accompanied the mother to the shrine became the boy who accompanied his father to the mosque.

Language is another crucial site for the negotiation of religious pluralisation. The linking of bodies of religious knowledge to specific, and above all erudite, languages could be used to restrict access. Multilingualism and the ability to address audiences from diverse linguistic backgrounds facilitated pluralisation and the empowerment of individuals, but might also be used restrictively to mark religious authority. Being able to understand, copy, and comment upon authoritative texts is a competence that enables barely visible micro-pluralisation or produced consequential changes. Switching language to a more accessible idiom likewise leads to pluralisation, as in the case of Persian in the 16th and 17th centuries. Zechendorff used the teaching of another language, Arabic in his case, to transport religious ideas. Specific terms could be used to create borders and negotiate pluralisation – or to hide advanced internal pluralisation. In classical India, the acceptance of individuals as sources of religious knowledge modified the understanding of the role of language, which had been seen as a closed system of collective knowledge. "Trustworthy persons" emerged as a new category of verbal reliability and evidence for religious truth claims (Malinar).

By way of conclusion, we would like to emphasise that pluralisation and individualisation are intertwined and intrinsically connected to determining the function of religious authorities. Accordingly, processes of individualisation are as precarious, temporary and reversible as are the complex processes of pluralisation. Access to, and dissemination of, media of religious communication are as crucial for individuals in manifesting the multiplication of religious signs and practices as they are in stabilising them. Coping with and regulating pluralisation affects the place of religion in society in many respects. It calls for ascribing religious authority to individuals in new ways, opening space and defining its limits. Legal and political frameworks, as have been addressed in our chapters (see also IV.1), are existent, accepted and invoked – or newly developed. The concepts of individual religious agency entertained by the political, legal and economic (for instance in the role of patrons) actors are part of the negotiation of pluralisation and the recognition or rejection of individual religious authority.