



Introduction to the issue

A comparative perspective in the study of religion, which goes beyond the Eurocentric interests with their predominating Judeo-Christian standpoint, has already been taken up in one of our previous issues (*Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, 2014, Vol. 4, No. 1). This time, we focus on the South Asian context only. In particular, we discuss the academic approach to the study of religion in contemporary India and Bangladesh, which may be distinguished from other attitudes such as the theological study of religion or a traditional insiders' reflection on their own/other religion(s), including the perspective of a proselyte, or a more selective and instrumental engagement in religious issues typical of the on-going political debates.

Eight research papers included in this volume address the leading theme *The academic study of religion in South Asia*, and were submitted by authors invited by two guest editors, Asha Mukherjee (Visva-Bharati University, India), and Åke Sander (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) together with the co-ordinating host editor, Marzenna Jakubczak (Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland). Apart from a shared interest in Indian philosophy and the sociology of religion shared by the international contributors to this volume, most of the authors also wanted to dedicate their papers to the memory of the late Professor Joseph T. O'Connell, the eminent colleague and outstanding scholar who inspired other researchers for years and was deeply involved himself in promoting the high standards of the academic study of religion in South Asian universities. Thus, Asha Mukherjee opens the volume with her foreword commemorating Joseph T. O'Connell's sincere and long-term dedication to the field. Åke Sander offers a brief overview of Joe's most significant publications highlighting his major research interests, such as Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism, the study of religion in South Asia, especially Bangladesh, Bengal in the diaspora, Rabindranath Tagore, and the Sikh religious tradition. A warm-hearted remembrance by one of Joe's students, Amir Hussain, follows

Sander's overview. The subsequent eight research papers and one review article discuss a variety of topics related to the leading theme.

The first three papers (by Sharma, Mukherjee, and Khan) are focused on the development of the contemporary Indian study of religion, including its conceptualisation and the specific socio-political context which determined the present institutionalisation of this domain. The following three papers (by Sikka, Beaman, and Sardella) are devoted to a more general theoretical consideration of the East–West comparative study of religion and the crucial role of philosophy in problematising religious discourse, especially in the era of globalisation and religious pluralism. The subsequent two papers (by Sander co-authored with Cavallin and Kumar, and by Alles) relay the on-going empirical research on the transformation of the religious identities, aspirations, and needs of various social groups in contemporary India. The final contribution to the leading theme (by Sayem) documents the unique role of Professor Joseph T. O'Connell in inculcating the academic study of religion in Bangladesh.

Arvind Sharma, in his paper entitled *The case for introducing the study of religion in India*, presents a concise report of the introduction of the study of religion in India since 1947. While doing so, he refers to the Constitution of India and the so-called Nehruvian Consensus, the Kothari Commission, which made an important distinction between 'religious education' and 'education about religion', as well as several other bodies responsible for national policy on education, which formed the unique shape of Indian secularism. Asha Mukherjee, the author of the subsequent paper on the *Comparative religion as an academic study in contemporary India*, aims to argue that due to the great diversity of religious backgrounds, sensitivities, and language competences on the part of Indians, they are simply doomed to a comparative methodology of the study of religion. And even though 'living religion' may be more important for a typical Indian than studying, describing, or knowing religion, a 'comparative religion' of an authentic sort is what Indian scholars truly need to implement amongst the diverse pressures, expectations, challenges, and opportunities of contemporary pluralist Indian society. In his paper on *Tagore and the academic study of religion*, Abraham H. Khan reconsiders Rabindranath Tagore's views on the study of religion in university-level education in the East, and at Visva-Bharati in particular, referring to two of his essays, 'Eastern University' and 'Hindu University'. Sonia Sikka's article entitled *The role of philosophy in the academic study of religion in India* emphasises the fact that Joseph T. O'Connell drew attention to the relative scarcity of academic work on religion in South Asia, and offered as a plausible explanation for this state of affairs the tension between secular and religio-political communal interests. Sikka also explores the potential role of philosophy as an established academic discipline within this situation, in the Indian context. She argues that objective study, including the evaluation of the truth claims of various religious

traditions, is an important aspect of academic as opposed to confessional engagement with religion. As Sikka rightly observes, unlike Western countries, philosophy and religion were never clearly separated in India and did not evolve in tension with one another. Therefore, the history of Indian philosophy includes and is included within the history of its 'religions', in a way that makes the philosophical examination of the truth claims of Indian religions internal to those religions themselves. The following paper by Lori G. Beaman, *A focus on getting along: respect, caring and diversity*, connects the notion of 'deep equality' with two broad lessons that can be taken from O'Connell's approach pertaining to the study of religious diversity in contemporary life. The first is the recognition of the amorphous nature of religious identity, and the second is the necessity of searching for models of socio-cultural integration in the face of difference. As Beaman argues, these lessons are valuable in providing an alternative discourse of diversity that moves away from problematisation towards collaboration. In his paper on *The concept of 'transcendence' in modern Western philosophy and in twentieth century Hindu thought*, Ferdinando Sardella looks at some perspectives offered by the nineteenth and the twentieth century Anglo-American and continental European philosophers of religion and presents their views in relation to the concept of transcendence formulated by the Bengali Hindu traditionalist Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (1874–1937). While doing so, Sardella raises such questions as: what is transcendence in the philosophy of religion, how can one speak of it, and what is its goal, among others. Åke Sander, Clemens Cavallin, and Sushil Kumar, co-authors of the article on the *Changing views at Banaras Hindu University on the Academic Study of Religion: A first report from an on-going research project*, note that there is a surprisingly small number of departments, centres, or even programmes for the academic study of religion, given India's vibrant religious landscape. In their paper, they discuss this issue based on the preliminary results of twenty-eight semi-structured interviews conducted at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, India, in 2014 and 2015. Their focus is on the views of university teachers and researchers concerning the place, role, and function of religion and religious studies at BHU. The last research paper discussing the leading theme of the issue is entitled *Kept in translation: Adivasi cultural tropes in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha*. The author, Greg Alles, considers a little-studied branch of Swaminarayan Hinduism, the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, whose headquarters are located in Bakrol, Anand District, Gujarat. It is specifically concerned with the results of the activities of this branch among the *adivasi* (tribal) people in the Chhotaudepur District in eastern central Gujarat, results of the sort that were frequently referred to as 'Sanskritisation', or as Alles prefers to call, 'bhagatisation'. Although it is common in the area to view people who participate in a community such as the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha as abandoning *adivasi* traditions altogether, this article suggests that

such a view is misleading. Drawing inspiration from James Clifford's work on cultural translation and Greg Urban's work on cultural transformation, Alles suggests that the Sanstha exemplifies one way in which elements of *adivasi* culture persist when *adivasis* translate their traditions into settings marked by increasing contact with globalising modernities. The last contribution to this section is a review authored by Md. Abu Sayem entitled *The nature of the academic study of religion in Dhaka University and the role of Professor Joseph T. O'Connell*. Sayem details how the academic study of religion has been developed at Dhaka University in the Department of World Religions and Culture under the Faculty of Arts. While doing so, he elucidates the crucial role of the late Professor Dr Joseph T. O'Connell in forming the Department and its affiliated Centre for Inter-Religious and Intercultural Dialogue as an academic setting for studying, teaching, and conducting research on different religious issues to ensure the promotion of multi-religious and multicultural peace in Bangladesh.

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The subsequent papers do not address the leading theme of the issue, although three of them (by Sajdek, Figas-Skrzypulec, and Radwańska) may also, indirectly, contribute to comparative East-West studies. Paweł Sajdek, in his article entitled '*Śabda*' in the ancient Indian grammarians' doctrine, aims to investigate various contexts of the Sanskrit word *śabda* (rendered as 'sound', 'word', 'speech', 'language', 'the right word', 'correct expression', or 'verbal authority or evidence') in order to elucidate its meaning as understood by Indian grammarians, with particular emphasis placed on the followers of the *śabdādvaita* school. In the following paper, *Krytyka nauki przez odniesienie do holizmu wiedzy w myśli Seyyeda Hosseina Nasra oraz Ismaila al-Faruqiego* [The critique of science in light of the epistemological holism in the thoughts of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ismail al-Faruqi], Justyna Figas-Skrzypulec presents the cognitive, educational, and philosophical strategy, sometimes called reconstructionism, proposed by a number of Muslim authors as a proper reaction to modern science. To highlight the pre-modern background for this reaction, Figas-Skrzypulec uses two examples: the idea of Islamic science by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and the *Islamization of knowledge* project by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi. Their critique of Euro-Atlantic science is based on its perceived effects on society and morality (secularisation, imperialism and colonialism, cruelty towards laboratory animals, etc.) as well as on *tawhid*, the Islamic idea of unity. Magda Radwańska, in her paper entitled *Grupy religijne jako kolektywy myślowe. Próba zastosowania teorii Ludwika Flecka w socjologii religii* [Religious groups as thought collectives: An application of the theory of Ludwig Fleck in the sociology of religion], tries to prove the thesis, which assumes that

every cognition and every religious experience are of a social nature. While doing so, she refers to the claim of Ludwik Fleck, a Polish microbiologist and philosopher of science active in the 1930s and 1940s, that the way of thinking for all exploring individuals — who constitute a part of a certain ‘thought collective’ — is determined by their past and the past of the field of knowledge, which is the object of cognition. Radwańska also considers whether Fleck’s theory can be used to explain religious phenomena and describe the structures of religious groups. The last paper by Joanna Luc, *Odpowiedź Lowe’a na argument Ramsey’a przeciwko rozróżnieniu uniwersalia-indywidualia* [The answer of Lowe to Ramsey’s argument against the distinction universal *vs.* individual], presents Frank P. Ramsey’s argumentation against the universal–particular distinction, which is based on the assumption that this division requires another one: namely, subject–predicate distinction. Luc also discusses Edward Jonathan Lowe’s theory that is critical of Ramsey’s position. She analyses in detail Lowe’s solution while confronting it with Ramsey’s remarks and reconsidering other objections. In the author’s opinion, autonomy and the value of ontology cannot be shown from a purely external position. We should first assume that this discipline does make sense and then explore its virtues or drawbacks by using its notions.

The final column of this issue includes three short book reviews by Katarzyna Haremska, Paweł Kłoczowski, and Jan Wawrzyniak, which follow a longer polemical review by Szymon Bródka.

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