

Religious diversity

Looking Eastward: (Asia) beyond the West

The subject matter of this special issue is anything but new: religious diversity has already been widely discussed in theology, philosophy, history and sociology. (Too) many times, however, diversity has been measured against the yardstick of the changing face of monotheistic models of religion (mainly Christianity). Asian religions have stood at the opposite end of a spectrum of analytical models in religious studies ever since Max Weber's classic analysis of Asian religions as mixed systems of beliefs *per se*. This distinction is, nevertheless, rather problematic, and calls for a closer examination of the conceptual status of *diversity*, and of the forms it assumes in Asian contexts.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE attempts to track these ideas, engage in the debate and discuss the relevance of the issue of diversity. The four articles of this special issue constitute half of the papers presented at an international conference on 'Religious Diversity: Comparative Views East (Asia) and West (Europe)', held in Strasbourg, 4 December 2015 at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Strasbourg (USIAS). They all deal with a particular aspect of diversity in the Asian context. Vincent Goossaert (CNRS-EPHE, France) highlights the issue of religious diversity amongst the social elites of China, whilst Zheng Shanshan (University of Lyon, France) reopens the discussion around 'popular religion' in China. Salomé Deboos (Unistra, France) puts the emphasis on the inner diversity of cultures, religions, and economic exchanges in northern India, and finally Huang Jianbo and Hu Mengyin (East China Normal University) explore the role of prayer in the identity of Chinese Christians. These case studies certainly do not deal with all the aspects of religious diversity in

Asia. But each of them casts light on a local but specific aspect of this complex reality.

Approaching Religion is happy to introduce this timely and thought provoking discussion to its readers, challenging the normative 'western' views on the central concepts of our research field. In order for the study of religion to become a truly open, equal and diverse research field, such challenging perspectives are profoundly needed. ■

Lionel Obadia and Ruth Illman
Editors

Lionel Obadia, PhD, is Professor in Anthropology at the University of Lyon 2, France, specializing in religious studies, anthropology and the sociology of religion. After gaining a PhD on Buddhism in France and in the West, he has studied Buddhism, shamanism and witchcraft in Asia, mainly Nepal. He has recently conducted research on Jewish Messianic movements in Europe, the US and Israel, and football (soccer) in a religious perspective in France. He is the author of ten books, among them *La marchandisation de Dieu* (2013), *Anthropologie des religions* (2007), *Religion* (2004), *Sorcellerie* (2004), *Le bouddhisme en Occident* (2007), and *The Economics of Religion* with Donald Wood (Emerald 2011) and more than one hundred chapters and articles in French, English, Spanish, Chinese and German.

Ruth Illman is docent of comparative religion at Åbo Akademi University and director of the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History in Turku, Finland. Her main research interests include interreligious dialogue, religion and art, and contemporary Judaism. Among her recent publications are the books *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue* (Routledge 2012) and *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith*, co-authored with W. Alan Smith (Routledge 2013, paperback edn 2016). She is the editor of *Approaching Religion* and *Scripta Instituti Donneriani*, published by the Donner Institute, and, together with Karin Hedner Zetterholm, of the peer-reviewed journal *Nordisk judaistik - Scandinavian Jewish Studies*.