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Religious diversity: comparative views East (Asia) and West (Europe)

International workshop of the Institute of Advanced Studies of Strasbourg, in collaboration with DRES (UMR 7354, CNRS) and MISHA (CNRS)

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Auditorium de l'Institut des Sciences et d'Ingénierie Supramoléculaire (ISIS)

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Issues in diversity have become crucial all around the planet for political and social reasons. The political matter of pluralism and religious tolerance, most discussed nowadays, adds to Not only modernization processes (whatever the contexts in which they take place, the shapes they assume and the effects they generate on social and cultural life) have impelled for a social and political recognition of the differences in beliefs and practices, but globalization has moreover produced more fragmentation and creativity in religious landscapes, in facilitating the diffusion, borrowing and mixing of elements originating in different religious systems. They enhance the complexity to traditional configurations of religions, often previously already diverse. There are countless recordings of localized case studies unveiling the complex arrangements of religious beliefs, practices, organizations and sense of belonging – and each of them is encapsulated in a regional specificity. Of course exist transversal processes of diversification relating to same global conditions. But the shapes, the features and the political-social backgrounds of such diversities remain tributary of their own *local* history. In a world whose cultural and religious plurality is expanding it nevertheless expands in a variety of forms and for somewhat different reasons: diversity in the West assumes somewhat different logics and shapes than in the East. The comparison between different *forms* of religious diversities therefore supposes to take into account the role of religious systems themselves and the political context in which they are embedded. It otherwise requires a parallel comparison of the *logics* of diversity (opposition, coexistence, hybridity, syncretism ...) and the social acceptance of religions and religious relationships in their specific cultural backgrounds. Comparing *forms*, *situations* and *modalities* of religious *diversities* is already a difficult task: do we have same ideas of diversity, same languages to describe it, to what extent the cultural and political contexts are comparable, and of course, what is worth for Western monotheisms is also worth for Asian cosmic or legal religions? This workshop will discuss such issues on the basis of ethnographic evidences and empirical case studies.

9h30 - Presentation

10h00 - Introduction: comparing “religious diversities”: issues, perspectives and problems

Lionel Obadia, University of Lyon2 and USIAS, France

This introductory paper deals with the issue of “religious diversity”, and attempts to point at the issues regarding its study in a comparative way. The conceptual utterance is not reducible to other terms (like “pluralism”) and figures out a certain arrangement of symbols, beliefs, practices and institutions whose components, dynamics and shapes are conditional on the political and cultural history of a religion (or a set of religions or religious phenomena) in a given context. In this respect, Asian polytheisms offer very different examples of a vast array of models of diversities, in contrast with Western monotheisms, in the context of previously “Christian” Europe, now mainly secularized. Both religious systems however are reshaped by the forces of modernization processes and global influences, but the issue of “diversity” remains a local one.

10h30 - Historians and Anthropologists rethink religious diversity in China

Vincent Goossaert – Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, GSRL – Paris, France

This paper is based on my ongoing work on the religious structure of local society in the Jiangnan region of China from the early modern period to the present. It proposes to set aside the political categories of the five official religions plus “popular faith” that hinders our understanding of what is going on today and its historical roots, and to introduce other analytical approaches to think through religious diversity in modern and contemporary Jiangnan (and, presumably, other parts of the world). The first such approach is the four-dimensional buildup of local society (territorial, historical, economic, and associational); the second is the “liturgical frameworks” (notably as developed by Kenneth Dean). The paper will show the hermeneutical usefulness of these approaches (and how they can be combined) and their potential for a China-informed history of religion.

Pause

11h30 How religion diversity is challenging by politics in Jammy & Kashmir State – A political anthropology perspective

Salomé Deboos – University of Strasbourg – France

The historical, political and religious dimensions of the conflicting Hindu-Muslim relationships in Jammu-Kashmir have received ample scholarly attention. No attention has been paid, however, to communities in the region, in which for centuries a peaceful co-existence between adherents of Islam and Buddhism has been the standard social praxis. As a result, we have insufficient analytical insight into the social conditions and their ideological foundations that make such local societies resilient in the face of an increasing religious fundamentalism of any kind, hence preclude such violence to erupt in the first place. My formal research addresses precisely this question. It aims to research the socio-cultural dynamics of multi-religious communities in the region, in which the absolutist exclusiveness of world-religious identities - including the political aspirations grounded in them - is rejected in favour of communal identities, which transcend the different world-religious identities of their members.

12h Discussion

12h30 meal

14h - Globalization, culture movement and folk belief (民间信仰)

Liu, Zheng'ai

Globalization has accelerated worldwide cultural movement and blending and results in the rise of localism and a new wave of nationalism. Culture becomes homogenized as well as unique. As an increasing economic power, China begins to use culture as a new way to demonstrate its strength. Traditional culture becomes alternative of the Party's legitimacy to revolutionary ideology as the latter declines. In the new cultural movement which is labeled as "intangible cultural heritage protection", folk belief, which has longstanding been viewed as superstition and was forbidden, began to receive protection after fragmented treatment. However, folk belief is not given enough legitimacy in the official cultural policy and religion policy. As a result, folk belief is inevitably de-religionized, becomes administrative hierarchical, and serves as resources. It also leads to a new dichotomy (superior/inferior, high/low, official rite 正祀/non-official rite 淫祀) in intangible cultural heritage itself. A paradox arises during the process: modernity is pursued while tradition, which was replaced by modernity, is sought to recover. Intellectual and political elite's insensitivity to the Western discourse hegemony since the 20th century is responsible for the paradox. This is reflected in the discussions about if folk belief is religion. The main cause of this paradox is that Chinese intellectual and politic elite's paralysis to the hegemony of western discourse, and it appears to the discussions about whether or not the folk belief are "religion".

14h30 - Diverse linkages and multiple actors: Chinese Buddhism in France

JI Zhe, INALCO - France

Based on fieldwork conducted in the Île-de-France, this presentation distinguishes three patterns in the organization of Buddhist-themed collective practices in the Chinese diaspora in France. Each of these patterns prioritizes a particular globalization linkage, which are respectively an ethnolinguistic immigrant group, a transnational organizational system, and information technology. The author argues that religious globalization is a multilayered trans-boundary process, through which communities, organizations, and individuals reconstitute relations between religious practice and sociogeographic space. In this process, various clergy-laity relationships and diverse manners of authority legitimization are integrated into a complex topology, which creates the diversity of Chinese Buddhism in its globalization.

15h - Becoming Christians: Prayers and Subject Positioning of an Urban Church in China

Huang Jianbo

Prayers in Christianity are often seen as a theological or pastoral category, while the social scientific study of prayers generally tends to dismiss prayers only as some psychological comfort or collective construction. What is prayer, and what it means for Christians who practice prayer remains a dissatisfied issue need more careful and serious studies? Interestingly, in his unfinished dissertation on prayer, Marcel Mauss (1968/1909) tried to give a concrete definition of prayer from a social scientific perspective. More recently, Tanya Luhrmann (2012) tried to seriously consider American evangelical's prayer life in her interesting works, *When God Talks Back*. Based on fieldwork with an urban church in China, we will give some accounts of the contemporary Chinese Christians and their prayer life, and try to elaborate its meanings, esp. in terms of their subject formation process. We will argue that to understand Christians and Christianity, we should not only consider Christian just as a given or acquired identity, but more the process of becoming a Christian in their practices. What we do defines what we are, or even we are what we do.

Coffee break

16h - When they talk about « religion », what do they talk about? Empirical observations from a fieldwork in the East of Qinghai

Cao Wei – University of Lyon 2, LARHRA

After the arrival of the neologism ‘*zong jiao*’ (the translation of the word ‘religion’ in Chinese, in the early 20th century in China, the concept of religion is used in political and academic spheres at a global context, but as well in a more local one. *Zong jiao* assumes different meanings depending on the context. In the East of the Qinghai province, in the North West of China, at the crossroads of religious traditions, the word is differently understood and used in ordinary life. The very concept of *zong jiao* is used in two distinct situations. First *zong jiao* is synonymous of ethnic identity. In this case, it reveals a prejudice in the relationships between ethnic identities and local religious traditions. And second, the meaning associated with politics, and unveils the tension between these traditions and the political control in this area. The inner diversity of ‘religion’ can be found not only in ordinary life, but as well, in the ways one describes religious beliefs with the help of conceptual categories. Mixed with an ancient and local term, ‘*jiao men*’ (‘the doors of teaching’), the very notion of *zongjiao* describes a world of religious traditions, agglomerate of different beliefs and practices observed in a local context.

16h30 - Unity and Diversity, between the logics of system and the tactics of actors: views from Nepal

Lionel Obadia - Université of Lyon 2, LARHRA

In the Highlands of Northern Nepal, where the Buddhist minorities (Sherpas and Tibetans) are demographically dominant, the variety of religious beliefs and practices is stunning and assume a specific shape. Yet, Nepal is itself a country with a mosaic face, since dozen linguistic, ethnic and religious groups are. The religious landscape is a mix between official religions (like Buddhism, Hinduism, Shamanism but as well) and more discreet layers of religiosity (animism, magic, witchcraft, popular beliefs) coexisting in different layers of religiosity (Mumford, 1998). The maybe most striking ethnographic evidence and most interesting conceptual issues lies the gap existing between the religious attitudes and values at the level of traditions and institutions, and at the level of individual actors. Traditions compose united “systems” based on tension, opposition or cooperation between institutional actors (monks, priests, shamans, traditional Ayurveda therapists, soothsayers, and so on) but are used as alternate and/or cumulative and/or combined symbolic resources by the lay people, in the villager where these traditions dwell. What is “diversity” and for who, then?

17h - Conclusions and discussion

Free entrance

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