

East and West in Leipzig—A Preface to this Collection

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On Friday, October 26, 2019, Prof. Antoaneta Nikolova convened a one-day workshop on “East-West Dialogue: Religious and Cultural Aspects” as part of her EU Horizon 2020 project “Perception of Eastern Religions in Europe,” which she is currently conducting as a visiting scholar at Leipzig University’s Institute of East Asian Studies. The papers in this special issue of *NotaBene* are based on the presentations given and discussions conducted in this fruitful setting.

In Leipzig, a title such as “East-West Dialogue” might easily be understood as referring to East and West Germany (or East and West Germans), or perhaps Eastern and Western Europe. However, only one paper takes the latter perspective as its focus, as Nonka **Bogomilova** studies the diverging trends of institutional religious participation comparatively between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as among the post-communist countries.

Most articles included here, however, follow Nikolova’s definition of East and West writ large, i.e., India and East Asia on the one hand, and Europe on the other. Thus, most papers of the workshop are engaged in the study of some kind of interaction or comparison between these large cultural spheres. The topics range from comparisons of fundamental worldviews characterized variously as oppositional, dialectical, complementary, non-dual, and oneness (**Nikolova**) over descriptions of analogies (or identities?) between the cosmologies of modern physics and Eastern Wisdom (**Georgiev**) to impassioned calls for an “ensouled” view of and relationship with the world as a precondition for resolving the present ecological crisis—a view that Graham **Parkes** finds best realized in Daoist notions of *qi*. Thomas **Diesner** focuses his contribution on the translatability of this same concept, emphasizing the crucial need for physical experience in achieving intercultural understanding since what is being translated here is not an abstract notion, but a cultural practice (*Qigong*).

Another paper focused on transcultural practice is Milena **Bratoeva**’s essay on “Oral Performance of Sanskrit Mantras in the West.” How do we interpret the recitation of Sanskrit mantras by Bulgarian practitioners who do not know Sanskrit? Is this a true transcultural practice in that the mantras maintain their meaning outside their original context? Bratoeva argues that as mantras are not primarily discursive texts but powerful speech, their recitation by Bulgarian yoga practitioners entails their pragmatic functionality of speech acts as effective agents of change—a functionality that is possibly continuous with its cultural context of origin.

Such practice-based approaches are one way to tackle the tricky issues of cultural comparisons and translations, with their complex discursive baggage of Orientalism, as pointed out and discussed by Julia **Rone**. Christoph **Kleine** offers a possible resolution of the quandary by pointing out that the alleged Western concepts imposed on Eastern cultures may themselves already be the product of cross-cultural comparison and dialogue, a point he argues historically with reference to sixteenth and seventeenth century exchanges between Jesuit missionaries and Japanese concerning “religion” and religious terminologies, hoping thereby to show “a way out of the deadlock between cultural particularism and radical incommensurabilism on the one side and cultural universalism and undue generalisation on the other.”

I hope that this rich harvest of intellectual contributions here gathered will stimulate further discussion, insight, and study.