INTRODUCTION

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This volume documents the opening conference of the Interdisciplinary Consortium for Research in the Humanities “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe”, which took place from 15 to 17 October 2008 in the Ruhr University Bochum’s conference centre. The Bochum consortium is the result of an initiative by Prof. Dr Volkhard Krech, who submitted a corresponding bid to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This bid was approved in November 2007. By April 2008 the consortium was already able to start work. It is thus one of the first of the now ten consortia of this funding format, which is designed to create a “free space” for outstanding scholars specifically for their interdisciplinary research by exempting them from other university commitments. Overall, the funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research aims to intensify the work in humanities disciplines and raise the profile of their achievements nationally and internationally. Thanks to interdisciplinary topics, whose study provides a sound theoretical basis and at the same time is empirically and analytically differentiated, the consortia are intended to bolster interdisciplinary cooperation at universities and thus contribute to the further development of methodology in the humanities. To support this initiative, up to ten visiting scholars from around the world can be invited annually to take part in a one-year research stay. Beyond this, the project has the medium and long-term aim of fostering an intense exchange and sustained cooperation with foreign research institutions.

In honour of the late philologist, literature scholar and philosopher Käte Hamburger, who passed away in 1992, the Interdisciplinary Consortia for Research in the Humanities were renamed the “Käte Hamburger” Consortia in 2010. Käte Hamburger is one of the most significant 20th century German scholars in the humanities. Her work “Die Logik der Dichtung” (The Logic of Literature), published in 1957, is considered a standard reference work for interdisciplinary narratology. During her lifetime, the author examined overarching questions of philosophy, aesthetics and the history of literature, notably the relationships between literature and ethics, development trends in
contemporary theatre and the new medium of film and – at a time in which this was considered reprehensible rather than desirable in academic circles – always went beyond the confines of the individual specialist disciplines. As a staunch humanist and child of the Enlightenment, she countered the dehumanisation of Western culture and a political mystification of the “German fate” – popular for a long time as a way of relieving the burden of the past – with objective, historically backed and at the same time sophisticated analyses. Due to anti-Semitic tendencies and gender-specific scepticism before and after the Second World War, which Käte Hamburger spent in Swedish exile, the Jewess born in Germany was never able to establish herself at a German University. She nonetheless untiringly continued her research. Her name reminds us that excellent research was often only possible outside of institutional and political sponsorship, and perhaps even still is, but that we should all strive to prevent scholarship in the humanities being pushed to the margins of society where the necessary space and room for critical questions can be bought only at the price of endangering one’s livelihood.

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The Käte Hamburger Consortium “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” firmly sees itself as a community of learning in which different knowledge and subject cultures develop innovative approaches for culturally comparative research on religion through exchange and confrontation. Thanks to broad and enthusiastic interest at the Ruhr University, a multitude of disciplines are represented in the Bochum consortium; alongside religious studies and sociology of religion, this includes European history disciplines, classical philology, Protestant and Catholic theology, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, Chinese studies, Korean studies and Japanese studies. The work of the consortium is divided into four ‘research fields’, each of which focus on one aspect of religious dynamics and reflect upon their synchronic and diachronic mutations through the exchange with the three other working groups. The research fields serve as organisational units for the consortium’s work and also determined the structure of the sections of the opening conference as well as how the contributions in this publication are arranged. The four sections of the volume – “The Formation of the Major Religious Traditions through Inter-Religious Contact”, “Contacts between the Major Religious Tra-