PART THREE

THE NOTION OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS SEMANTICS
IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE
1. Doing Conceptual History of Religion in a Global Context

In its 3rd research field the Interdisciplinary Research Consortium “Dynamics in the History of Religion between Asia and Europe” explores the history of religious concepts, especially the history of the concept of ‘religion’ itself.¹ The contributions collected in this volume open a discussion on comparative religious history, which will go on in the Consortium for the next years. They deal with three major issues: the theory of the axial age (Assmann), interreligious quarrels about the concept of holy war (Syed), the concept of religion in China (Barrett/Tarocco, Ford Campany, McCutcheon) and the concept of canonisation (Davidson, Zehnder). Of course, these can be but exemplary studies, intending to open broad perspectives on the history of religion between Asia and Europe and a scientific practice of self-reflection, which is necessary in order to bridge such huge spaces and periods of time as the Consortium is going to do. In the following opening remarks I should like to focus some problems, which have to be observed and solved, if we want to succeed with our efforts.

1.1. Concepts as Structures of Society

Religious concepts cannot be considered as belonging to the concept of religion in a way comparable to pieces within a container. Each of them has its own structure deciding what is included and what excluded, and this structure may well change over time and space. Looking closer to the pragmatic usage made of them over time we find, that many of these structural distinctions run different from the distinction of “the religious” and “the non-religious”: A term like ‘piety’ for instance may refer to a religious but also to a secular virtue,