

# Mapping common territory—mapping other territory

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*This paper addresses the different functions of the construction of religious, i.e. sacred, space depending on whether such a construction is done in and for its own cultural sphere or whether it is done in and from a cultural context positioned outside the constructed space. This is demonstrated by two case studies of pilgrimage narratives. The first one concentrates on South-Asian culture (Kaśmīr, Nepal) in which two religious traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism) coexisted and constructed sacred space by either the same narratives or by similar but sufficiently different narratives to explain why these places were there and why they were sacred. The other example discusses the approach of culturally different and locally distant Chinese Buddhism towards Buddhist India, where it becomes clear that one of the functions of constructing space by description was to show that the places already known from a textual tradition, the Buddhist one, really existed.*

If one is trained as a historian, philologist and religionist in Asian cultures and religions, one of the most intriguing and disturbing facts one has to learn is that that the neat boundaries between culturally, politically and religiously construed entities become fuzzy as soon as one leaves the field of canonically ‘fixed’ texts and contexts, contexts which more often than not are built on Western and Christo-centric lines. For most Asian cultures, this kind of boundary is not able to cope simultaneously with historical and contemporaneous realities. The problems we have in defining ‘Hinduism’ (cf. Michaels 1998, 27ff.), for instance, are not least caused by the fact that there is—beside the lack of a generic term in pre-modern culture and languages itself—more confusing pluralism than unity.<sup>1</sup>

Religion has often been counter-defined against a secular sphere by being transcendent, and thus not restricted to space and time. To a modern student of religions, it should be clear, however, that religion is, for the purpose of study at least,

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<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that this does not mean that I believe that Christianity has been and is a uniform religion, but it seems fair to say that Christians tended and still tend to define themselves along a clear narrative of common religious history and a shared space of religious and cultural ‘domain’ than has been the case in Asia.