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## **Global Academic Networking and the question of Nationalism, Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation**

What can be the contribution of a humanistic academic network for the analysis of (and for the actual policy in relation to) the role of nationalism, ethnicity and religion in South Asia? Posing the question in another way: What might be the instrumental value of scholarly studies in this field? – We use to argue that the difference between natural and technical sciences on one hand, and the humanistics on the other, is that science and engineering create the possibilities for survival, but the scholarly endeavour makes the life worth while. The study has a value in itself. But we may nevertheless ask the question: How can we see a network of scholarly studies in relation to the questions of human survival, sustainable development, and peace?

The border region between humanistics, social and political sciences and natural and technical sciences is constituted by the questions of epistemology, a border field of special importance both for the function of the studies and for the communication of results. But it is also related to the question of selection: What research, and what studies are more important than others, what aspects and perspectives to choose? How to combine different theoretical approaches? To this epistemological field belong the question of how languages (in the words widest sense) function, how literary and artistic representations function, how human experience is expressed and communicated, how opinions are mobilized. All these aspects are of instrumental value for the function of a society and for the understanding of the mechanisms of societal dysfunction. Confidence, trust, is a pre-requisite for the function of the institutions of a society, and for peace and harmony. Laws and legislation, formulated rules, verbalised ethical norms have a very limited effect. Most of human behaviour is built on routines, non-verbalised concepts, that with is taken for granted (and therefore *not* to be found in texts, speeches, declarations, laws and protocols). Responsibility and trust can be part of the self evident. How is this “trust” created, communicated and strengthened? What are the sources, what are the processes? What are the dysfunctions? What is the relation between *verbalised* norms (the explicit ethical principles, the moral norms, the laws) and the *real* norms (the actual behaviour)? In the cooperation between humanistics and social sciences we can try to find answers to these questions. As a special task within this field, I see the analysis of such phenomena as “conspiracy theories”, the propagandistic use of historiography (i.e. history in mythical-legitimizing function), and the analysis of markers of group belonging, the markers of affiliation. Of special importance is the analysis of processes of change.

Society, concepts, cognitive universes, communication processes between human beings, the relation between intellectual concepts, communication, and power structures; in the study of these we can present the *prognostic* value of the humanistics, the contribution to the basis for decisions.

As indicated in the title, I intend to take up primarily the questions of nationalism, ethnicity and religious affiliation. We can formulate the problematic as a search for the *markers* of group belonging, and how the so called *heritage* of a group functions in relation to the feeling of loyalties, of world view, actual norms, and mobilization processes.

I have rather often used a metaphor to characterize the function of a group's cultural set up. I call it "the Basket", alluding to the corpus of traditions in that specific religion, ethnic entity or community, as we can find it in its activities, rituals, narratives, historiography, revered texts, and in its categorisations, terminology and observances; that which constitute the specific group's "heritage".

"The Basket" contains all those phenomena, activities, and beliefs, from the most elevated and advanced ones to the most debased and vulgar. All this can be found there, somewhere if not everywhere. But, and that is important, not everything is on display all the time. From the basket of tradition is taken only that which has relevance in a given situation. The point is that in the Basket can be found as well expressions of unity as of disunity, the plead for constancy and continuity as well as the legitimation of changes. The Basket "is leaking", and new things can be put into it. The reason why it keeps its attraction for many, and is regarded as valuable and worthy of belief and of loyalty, is obviously the fact that it actually *functions* in the life of the individual. It provides patterns of interpretation for what happens. The individual has experienced its ability to give meaning in crises, and that it provides perceptual patterns as well for the everyday events as for extraordinary experiences. What not functions disappears; it will be put back "in the Basket" for eventual future use, or disappear altogether. The role of group activities (rituals, preaching, education, organizational measures) is to maintain the tradition, to transfer the terms, the patterns of behaviour, and historiography of the group, to new generations, get them interiorized, and to maintain the group loyalty by common expressions for the personal individual experience. This means that the activities help the individual to obtain and to interiorize patterns of interpretation for his or her individual experience, in common with other individuals, the "significant others".

A special case is the activity which consists in *delimiting* these patterns against others: Apologetics, polemics (not necessarily of the violent kind). The delimitation process is comparatively easy to observe and to analyse. So have, for instance, in the different religious traditions, the *creeds* very much this function. The Islamic *Shahada* is an obvious example: "No god except God" defines the border as to both polytheists and

atheists, and “Muhammad is the Messenger of God” defines Islam as distinct from other religions. And if we hear a third phrase, “And Ali is God’s Saint”, we know that we have to do with a Shii Muslim, not a Sunni. The Christian *Symbolum Apostolicum* does not contain a word on central religious experiences in Christianity, and does not even mention that Jesus has preached anything; but we can in each one of its phrases detect a delimitation against different groups in the early history of Christianity, groups regarded as heretics. Doctrine and theology have very much the function of a “border defence”, a border defence using material from “the Basket”. Also specific *observances* as to food and clothing have very much this function of delimitation, of defining group belonging.

The “border defence”, has a function in the creation of group loyalty, the feeling of belonging, to be different from others. This can transform itself to oppression, and result in structural and actual violence. Group loyalty can be maintained as a *forced compliance*, by measures of pressure, social pressures, rewards for loyalty, punishments for disloyalty; a forced compliance instead of a loyalty due to common experiences. In extreme case the tradition and historiography are used to legitimize violence against the ones defined as “others”.

The use of the content in “the Basket” as tools for mobilization and activity in the political field, the field of compulsion, social, political and legislative measures, tends to stress the aspects of delimitation, of differences in regard to others. Regardless of who the enemy is, the tendency as to the function is the same.

[The contemporary use of religious categorisations, terms, and patterns in politics shows a dilemma very clearly: The goal is to use, for mobilizing purposes, the high evaluation which the individual has of the religious tradition, due to his personal experience of religiosity. In that process the religious language is removed from its function as perceptual pattern for the personal religiosity, and thus risks to lose its attraction. Two extremes, quietism and militancy, are opposed to each other, but the militancy cannot survive in the long run without the individual religiosity, and the latter cannot be withheld and expressed without the religious tradition, its vocabulary and patterns of interpretation. In the long run violence destroys the very basis for the mobilization.]

In the individual’s or the group’s actual choice of behaviour in a specific situation, the decisive factor (in the short run!) is how those involved *interpret* their situation. This is true for every one of us. Our choice of behaviour is determined by our interpretation of our situation. The interpretation comes from what we find in our very personal “basket”, our individual cognitive universe. We can see very clearly that important in this respect are the narratives, the stories, the “history” of our belonging. We may notice that for the group loyalty it is very often the history of “a chosen trauma”, a catastrophe in the past, a historical disaster, that constitutes the most decisive trait. We must also remark that the significant events of a particular historiography are not scattered evenly over the

centuries. They are in clusters, constituting the significant eras in the history of the specific group, be it a smaller community as a family, clan or tribe, or a large one as a religion, ethnicity or nation. In the narratives and jargons of the community, certain periods in the past are more significant than others.

A narrative providing an explanation or interpretation of the conditions of human life is called a myth. Myths are patterns of interpretation and perception in the form of stories given significance beyond the content of the story, beyond the very events counted in it. For the believer the myth is true, true in two respects: The story expresses a facticity; the events have happened. But more important is that it is true in the way that it explains my own (present) conditions, and gives them a meaning. It also decides the interpretation of the world outside myself and its behaviour. The myth functions as a pattern of perception, a filter which decides the choice from the huge amount of stimuli reaching our senses. We see in what happens to us signs of that which the myth expresses. If not, our loyalty to the group will falter.

The historian of religions is often very eager to point out that the myths also belongs to a ritual context. Its content is repeated frequently, ritually, regularly. One experiences participation in the events of the narrative. This is true also for secular narratives/myths as for instance national or ethnic historiography (and the corresponding rituals commemorating historical events).

For the nonbeliever the myth is no longer true in the first respect, it is no more regarded as history, as expressing a historical facticity. But this does not necessarily imply that it loses its function as “true” in the other, symbolic sense, its existential significance. It still contains a conceptual and interpretational pattern expressing the conditions of existence.

Religious myths can develop into history, become historicized epics. Myths about gods and heroes beyond time and space have then lost their mythical function but the narratives remain, changed into legend or historiography: The epics of the Persian Kings, the stories of the Pandavas in Mahabharata, the story of early Rome, all seem to be historicized myths. But we also meet the opposite process, i.e. that history obtains the function of the myth: history (and historiography) as patterns of perception, explaining the conditions of man, giving the feeling of belonging, of *having part* in significant events in the past. History as legitimation for political or national demands, the use of the idea of “a historical right” to something or other, constitutes an example of the mythical role of historiography. One uses the words “we” and “us” of events that happened before one even was born. Historiography is never a totally innocent phenomenon. It is always a question of choice, a choice of what in the past that we regard as significant events. The parts in any conflict choose their significant historical

events differently. As a rule all parts in the conflict present events in the past which have really happened, but not the same events...

To belong to a community, small or large, tribe, religious community, ethnic or linguistic group, nation – however defined – means to distinguish between “we” and “the others”. Communion, community - if not embracing all humanity - is by necessity and by definition a question of drawing boundaries. Belonging, communion, community, identity, whatever we call it, is the opposite to universality. You are defined in this respect as a representative of a group. On one hand we have the affiliation to the specific community, on the other hand we have today more than ever before the quest for (and need of) institutions, organisations, norms functioning on a larger, perhaps even a global level. How can we analyse the role of belonging, of identity, in this respect?

The problematic is related to the phenomenon of *modernity*, i. e. modernity characterized by the differentiation of functions. In premodernity the different roles and functions of the individual were more interconnected, more intertwined. If we take the example of a premodern society, be it a village in 18th century Sweden or a remote and isolated village in early 20th century Indian subcontinent, Tibet or Borneo, the individual’s life had a kind of cognitive coherence. You would probably die in the village where you were born, got education or know-how in the (extended) family. Relations and neighbours were the same. You would probably marry a neighbour’s daughter/son. Your source of sustenance or profession was the same as your ancestors’. And the family, clan and neighbourhood were identical with the functioning religious community. The rites of the family, the agricultural year, the rituals of the different stages in life, were intertwined with the religious customs. The religious myths were integrated with the ideas of common life. “Religion” and religious affiliation could not be distinguished from other aspects of life. And for the common man there was no need for universality. The village was essentially self reliant, and endogamous. The “cognitive universe” of the individual and the society was essentially within the frame of village life.

Modernity has meant differentiation: It is quite probable that you will die in another place than the town where you were born. Education and work often enough mean migration; a local school perhaps, but university elsewhere. Your profession will not be an inherited one. You will probably meet your future wife/husband as a student, and the mate will not come from your place of birth but from somewhere else. You will move in order to get jobs. The neighbours will not be your relatives, and probably not your professional colleagues either. If you have a religious affiliation, it will probably not be correlated to your profession, neither to your choice of residence. The practising of religion will be in some other place than was the case in your childhood. The religious rites will no more be related to or intertwined with the rites and customs of your profession, or neighbourhood, and their connection with the family rituals, jargons and

customs will be considerably weaker. Perhaps will they find new uses, for instance as legitimation for political actions or as a national marker. You have a whole set-up of “belongings”, i.e. identities as a professional, a family member, a sportsman etc., each of them with its narratives, jargons, norms, and observances. Your personal “cognitive universe” will simultaneously contain material from many different “baskets”. The religious belonging constitutes possibly one source for what is included in your mind, but one among many other sources. With modernity “religion” emerges as a *separate* category in societal life. “Religion” becomes a distinct entity, one possible affiliation, but one among several others. If there is not a “cognitive dissonance” in the mind of the individual, there is certainly a “cognitive compartmentalization”. Even if there is a claim that the religion should be “a comprehensive system”, this is not the case in actual life.

We can see that the various communities to which the individual belongs – simultaneously – are not limited to the neighbourhood. By new communication techniques we can be in communication/communion with colleagues, relatives, friends, brothers or sisters in the faith, all over the Globe. Even a group consisting of a very small number of members locally can constitute a large “community” on the global level. A religious communion is no more by necessity a local community. One of the most interesting phenomena of today is the existence of “web communities”, and “parachurches” (and their counterparts) connected with traditional or new religious tendencies. This globalisation of the local (or the marginalized) is of importance to study today, as it influences very much the ideas coming into the minds. And the process of idea spreading, with political consequences, is very fast due to the new techniques. Censorship is not possible any more.

Affiliation, belonging; simultaneously, the religious/ethnic/national identity is only one belonging among others, and not necessarily the most important one for the individual. There is, in the individual, a *hierarchy* of perhaps more or less contradicting belongings. And the order in that hierarchy changes due to the circumstances. Which of the belongings will be the important one in a specific situation? What factors will influence or decide the choice?

As already said, one characteristic today, especially in a developed and prosperous society, but not only there, is *availability*. By help of new information techniques, TV, video and sound cassettes, satellite channels etc. we can choose what to consume (also of religious matters) among many alternatives. The tradition, and thereby the specific belonging and what it should imply, has lost its self evidence. Even if we retain the affiliation, and even if we stress its importance, we are aware of the existence and availability of alternatives.

There is sometimes a tendency to see ethnicities, nations, or religions as constants, as unchangeable, identical with themselves through centuries. That picture has very little to do with reality. We can for instance see religious terms, rituals, categorizations, symbols and narratives being transferred from one generation to the next, constituting a religious tradition, sometimes for centuries, or even for thousand of years, but they are applied in new ways, they are interpreted differently, they fit into new frames, they are transformed. We may note that one and the same ritual, or narrative, can simultaneously have very different meanings and functions for the participating and engaged individuals, even if these persons should have the same formal affiliation. The rituals and narratives have no meaning in themselves but obtain meaning in the actual use of them.

May I quote from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (Vintage, Cox & Wyman, Reading, 1995)? The author makes Zeenat Vakil express her opinion of the new trend of Hindu Political extremism and the BJP policy:

‘What bunkum, I swear,’ she expostulated. Point one: in a religion with a thousand and one gods they suddenly decide only one chap matters. Then what about Calcutta, for example, where they don't go for Ram? And Shiva-temples are no longer suitable places of worship? Too stupid. Point two: Hinduism has many holy books, not one, but suddenly it is all Ramayan, Ramayan. Then where is the Gita? Where are all the Puranas? How dare they twist everything in this way? Bloody joke. And point three: for Hindus there is no requirement for a collective act of worship, but without that how are these types going to collect their beloved mobs? So suddenly there is this invention of mass puja, and that is declared the only way to show true, class-A devotion. A single, martial deity, a single book, and mob rule: that is what they have made of Hindu culture, its many-headed beauty, its peace.’

‘Zeeny, you're a Marxist,’ I pointed out. ‘This speech about a True Faith ruined by Actually Existing bastardisations used to be your guy's standard song. You think Hindus Sikhs Muslims never killed each other before?’

‘Post-Marxian,’ she corrected me. (p. 337f)

But the traditional function of religion *legitimizing power* has lost and loses much of its role successively as the religious tradition loses its character of being the self evident truth. People ask for other legitimations of power, the mandate of the people itself: democracy, even if this demand very often (and especially in the Muslim world today) is *expressed* with the words and narratives from the religious tradition, and with the dream of the modern welfare state viewed as an application of the “Medina state of the Prophet”, the interpretation of the tradition being the task of the people itself, not belonging only to the traditional elite. That is a characteristic of today: The traditional religious elites have lost much of their influence to others who claim the right to interpret and apply the religious tradition. The ideas are then spread by help of the new

media. Religiosity is not necessarily channelled through the once given religious hierarchies.

One consequence of the development is that we must consider the “religious heritage” and its preservation as something not bound to specific communities, institutions, specific religious persons, but rather as a common cultural heritage, not necessarily connected with personal belief or confession, and certainly not only belonging to a religious elite of functionaries. As well as the ancient Greek and Roman pantheon, and the Greek mythology, have been a very much living cultural heritage, a source for art and literature, in the renaissance, baroque and neoclassicist eras in Europe – although dead as living faiths - we can see how the elements of tradition today are used for artistic, literary and cineastic purposes, very often transcending the usual borders of ethnic or religious belonging.

May I include some reflections more specifically as an Islamologist? South Asia constitutes such an important part of the Muslim world.

The ethnic, communalistic and national antagonisms of the *Indian Subcontinent* have a considerable place in the mental horizon of the Muslim World, for the obvious reason that at least on third of the Globe’s Muslims are to be found there. We have not only the perpetual tension between the Indian Republic and Pakistan, with the Kashmir nightmare and the existence of nuclear weapons in the centre of the debate. The storming and occupation of the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, in October 1993, by government troops became the symbol of the religious implications of the crisis. Volunteers from other parts of the World are certainly involved in the fighting. The communalistic clashes in India, and the successes for the Hindu extremist BJP, and the violent demolition by a mob the 6th of December 1992, of the Babari Mosque in Ayodhya, was for a long time the main theme in the perspective of mass media in the Muslim World, as was the disturbances that followed in Bombay. One is too very much aware of the internal ethnic, political, and also confessional clashes in Pakistan and in Bangladesh, where the question of the role of religion in the state and in its legal and administrative institutions is crucial.

In the news media, much of the events on the Indian Subcontinent can rather easily be described in terms of conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims; and it is very often done: as aggression against Islam and Muslims. This distinction, Muslim - non-Muslim, has served very much as a *model of interpretation* for conflicts, at the cost of more relevant categorisations (e.g. economical, social, demographical).

The never ending civil war and power struggle in the complex of ethnicities, tribal and religious belongings that constitute Afghanistan, and the actions of the *taliban*, with its implication in Pakistan and in India, takes much consideration how to analyse. Behind



the permanent crisis, we can discern economical, social and demographic problems of enormous proportions. The social and political instability in the states of South Asia constitutes an acute danger for the regimes.

It is important to remember that the *states* and their governments and administrations not necessarily are the important actors in the development. Other entities, movements, organizations, informal net-works, loose alliances, having very little to do with the borders of existing states, are actors in the events. The governments have to take this into consideration. Even if they have not obtained their power as a result of any democratic process, they must reckon with popular opinions and with important groups in society. The use of religious terminology, by the governments, is a part of the “search for legitimacy”, counteracting groups in opposition.

We can also see the function of the “ethnic cleansing” and the systematic demolition of symbols, especially the symbols and token of the presence of “the other” and his history. In a conflict, where the idea of ethnic, national, or religious identity serves as legitimation, the fight of historiographies is an important part. As a result of the ethnic cleansing and the destruction of the symbols, as a result of sorrow and frustration, there is a risk (more than a risk: an evident tendency) of radicalisation, an *acceptance* of the role forced upon the individual or the group.

Again we must consider changes in the function of religion in society, changes which have to do with the relation between religion, tribal belongings, or other “identities”, and the structure of society.

“A strong state” is an expression found in the political jargon of Sweden. In a strong (secular) welfare state the individual derives his basic security by virtue of his citizenship as to the protection of life, health and property, and as to his obtaining education and social security, regardless of the economic means of his family or his affiliation (if any) to a religion, or to any specific group - other than the “nation”, i.e. the citizenship in the state. This notion of “a strong state” embraces the idea of legislation: Laws are not eternal and do not possess their validity by any inherent Divine nature or by tradition sanctified by age. The same rules, laws, privileges and duties are applicable to everyone, regardless of sex, tribal or ethnic identity, or religion. Citizenship is then the criterion of discrimination, a criterion taken for granted. Religion is not seen as an order of society, neither religious affiliation nor sex is connected with any special legal status.

This concept is problematic when the state and its institutions have not the strength and ability to guarantee the security and rights of the individual. (So in most South Asian states.) In that case citizenship is not the main asset. The individual is dependent on other social relations for his needs, health care, education, his protection and help: i.e.

the extended family, client relations, tribal belonging, and religious community. As actors we can also see NGOs of different kind. To have these structural differences and developments in mind is of importance when we analyse so called “cultural factors”. This means that key terms as “state”, “society”, “laws”, “family”, “religion”, and “rights”, have different conceptual fields, and thus different functional meaning, in societies of different structures.

May I at last point again to the importance of the processes of change?

During the past ten years we have noticed several Muslim ideologists and movements that explicitly, although in different ways and with different content, have formulated demands for democracy, legitimation of political power by popular mandate, Human Rights and liberties in the sense expressed in the UN’s Declaration of 1948 and in other international conventions. This is done with emphatic assurance that these values are compatible with Islam and Islamic Law, or even that these are the true expression of Islam. The sources and the norm systems of the religion are thus interpreted in ways differing as well from the traditional schools and methods of Islamic jurisprudence as from the “Islam”, or “Islamic order of society”, as interpreted and propagated by the so called Islamist movements (Muslim Brotherhood, an-Nahda, FIS – and in South Asia as to JIM, Jamaat-i Islami etc.) and their ideological view of religion and its role in the state, including the judiciary.

Among the participants in the debate, and on a global arena, pleading for Human rights and liberties, and reinterpretation of the legal sources, the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet, are the well-known Tunisian historian Mohammed Talbi, known also for his engagement in interreligious dialogue, the Sudanese lawyer and philosopher of jurisprudence, Abdullahi Ahmad an-Na’im, deeply influenced in his views on Islamic Law and the interpretation and applicability of its sources by Muhammad Mahmud Taha (who was hanged as a heretic in 1985). We find three of the leading ideologists in Indonesia, Amien Rais, now speaker of the Parliament, Nurcholish Madjid, engaged in education, and we may also include the now deposed former president Abdurrahman Abdul Wahid (“Gus Dur”). For the Iranian students, in 1999 and 2000 demonstrating and very insistently demanding democratic reforms, free speech and other liberties, the inspiring authority is Abdolkarim Soroush, whose importance as proponent of new hermeneutics and reinterpretation of Islamic Law we have become very much aware of recently. We can mention too the recent democratizing signals from the Pakistani “futurologist” Munawar Anees, a long time working in Malaysia. There are several others, and we could notice especially those Muslim feminists participating in the international debate on women’s rights, who with arguments related to the sources of Islamic Law, with new hermeneutical approaches, argue against the patriarchal structures of traditional Muslim societies and against the traditional applications of Islamic personal law. We have there not only well established participants since

considerable time, as Fatima Mernissi, but also more fundamentally religious thinkers as Riffat Hassan (who is a Pakistani, although working in the USA) and Amina Wadud Mohsin. I mention all these names as they are very much a part of the global debate, well known in South Asia too.

Within the Islamist movements even, we can notice tendencies to lay more stress on the mandate of the people, on liberties; a certain change in the discourse. The word “democracy” tends to have positive sentimental associations. As Gilles Kepel has demonstrated very clearly in his recent work *Jihad: Expansion et déclin de l’islamisme*, the Islamist movements, and the so called Islamic fundamentalism, is declining in influence, and their opponents and critics are gaining ground, and have the ear of intellectuals and of the middle classes, who have become scared and dismayed by the violence and terrorism connected with radical militant Islamist groups. The taliban in Afghanistan do not appeal to the pious bourgeoisie.

The new media means a change in authority. The traditional ‘*ulama*, the “learned ones”, the *fuqaha*’, the “jurisprudents” of islamic Law, have their authority by means of specific knowledge. They are specialists: The ‘*alim*’ has memorized the Qur’an, he knows thousands of ahadith, he is able to use the traditional methods to derive a “response” (*fatwa*) to every question regarding norms and rules, But today, not only the Qur’an but also the collections of ahadith as well, can be found on the web. There are hundreds of home pages and web sites where especially young Muslims are discussing, with each other and with others. The young Muslim student or engineer does not ask the *mufti* or other traditional specialist for an answer. He will search for it on the web, and he will find many answers, probably even that one which is relevant in his own situation. He will find the alternatives, traditional answers, new answers, different methods of hermeneutical approaches.

Thus, in order to retain and maintain a law system derived from the religious sources, it has to change, be experienced as applicable, relevant for the much wider “cognitive universe” of the individual and the society.

New media: Not only the web. There are parabolas and satellite TV, videos and sound cassettes. Messages and ideas are available, they are even available for illiterates. As already said: Censorship is impossible due to new techniques. The Iranian student, bewildered by the fact that his source of inspiration, Abdolkarim Soroush, is prevented from lecturing to the students, will phone him with his mobile telephone, ask him questions, and when the professor answers, the student will attach the telephone to a microphone, and all his friends can listen.

This too constitutes a situation to which the political leadership must accommodate. The questions cannot be muted or ignored.

Modernity has meant a precedence of rationality. The religious answer is not the only one. In order to defend the religious authority, there has developed a need to show or to prove the rationality of religiously motivated rules. I use to call this “the apologetic trap”. In order to defend the religious rule by arguing for its rationality, the rule’s foundation and motivation ceases to be by the religion, it becomes its rationality and not its divine origin. Reason over religion as authority. Natural science has very much taken over the function of being “the truth”, “reality”. Simultaneously the specific religion has lost much of its function as a foundation for norms in a society being involved in global processes. Now there is a demand to find a global ethic, norms valid, accepted and applicable on the global level. Then it is not possible to refer only to one specific religio-legal tradition and its sources. We can see that this problematic of a foundation for a global ethic is very much on the agenda for international “parliaments of world religions” which have been organized in recent years. There is a common interest here, among representatives for different religions, to argue for the societal and political relevance of religion in general. One argument is then that it might be possible to seek the globally valid in what can be seen as values common for all the different religions. The “consensus” between religions has thus become an argument and belongs to the criteria of how to interpret the tradition of the specific religion. But the very need of global valid norms has as a consequence a higher evaluation of international legal instruments, and of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the following conventions. We may notice, for instance, the role of the Dalai Lama in the “global discourse”.

New interpretations of the traditional heritage are very much responses to this problematic. Global processes, development of new media, the societal differentiation of functions, the individual’s belonging to various networks regardless of geographical boundaries and traditional group structures, have rendered the reinterpretation of tradition a necessity – if it should be able to be retained at all.

Islamic feminists (among them Riffat Hassan) point out that even the Qur’anic texts must be interpreted with regard to the social structures and conditions at the time and place of their revelation. When in the 34th verse of Sura 4 (*an-Nisa’*) is said that the men “excel” over women “because they spend out of their property”, that is because of their economic responsibilities, the feminists can point out that today both men and women participate equally in the economic support of the family, why the hierarchy between men and women mentioned in the verse is no longer relevant. The historical context, and societal changes become in that way tools in the hermeneutics in regard to the sources of the Islamic rule system, in this case in regard to personal law/family law.

Another method is the close reading of history, to dig deeper in “the Basket”: To collect all the available notices as to the role of women in Muslim history, especially during the

most significant and normative period according to Islamic historiography, that is the time of the Prophet and his immediate successor, his wives, the female personalities among his companions, and so on, in combination with interpretations of their importance and the significance of their special features and roles. The feminists criticize some of the traditions of *ahadith* (especially Abu Hurayra is regarded as an unreliable authority), and they point out the male-biased selection which characterizes traditional Islamic historiography.

[Still another method is to re-interpret the meaning of the words in the Qur'anic vocabulary. For instance, the word *qawwamun* in the verse mentioned above, is translated not as "maintainers" or "directors" of the women, but as "supporters", "helpers" of the women.]

The reformist reinterpretations can we see as ways of accommodation, accommodation to the international conventions, diminishing conflicts and tensions, but preserving the idea of a specific Islamic legal tradition depending on the sources of a law of divine origin. Necessity is in itself a valid legal principle: *maslaha*, the equal to the *commune bonum* of Roman law, tends to be regarded as more important. One argument for this accommodation is that the principles of the international conventions could be more easily accepted and get popular support if they are translated, so to speak, to the categorizations and the terminology of the Islamic legal tradition. It might be so. But we can rather see the process as a way to preserve the relevance of the Islamic legal tradition.

So, we have to analyse the role of different affiliations, the role of the hierarchy of the individual's belongings to one entity or other. We can see that the markers of belonging vary, and here too we have a field for future research:

We can see, as to the political leadership, that family belonging, descent, is a crucial factor, more important than for example gender: Consider the quasi dominance of female presidents, prime ministers, and party leaders in the whole region (Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, the Bandaranaike family in Sri Lanka, Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh, Corazon Aquino and Gloria Arroyo in the Philippines, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia).

Ethnicity, ethnic descent (and often connected with that: language) plays a role as we can see in the conflicts in Sri Lanka, in Pakistan, and as a factor when Bangladesh came into existence.

Nationality, in the sense of citizenship, has *some* value, but up to now we can see that it in reality comes rather low in the hierarchy of affiliations, and with a comparatively low

normative value. Loyalty is more often to other belongings, family, clan, ethnic group, religious community.

Religious and confessional affiliations have a lot of different functions, besides their eventual role for personal piety. They are of social, economical, even professional and certainly of political relevance. As for political functions, we can discern its role as national and ethnic marker (Pakistan, BJP in India etc), as legitimation of power, but also as expression of opposition. It has definitively to do with the law system, especially as to family law, law of inheritance. The question of jurisdictional belonging of the citizen in the states of the region is very often connected with the religious affiliation, which means that religious affiliation is not necessarily bound to any religious belief or personal religious experience.

Very close to religious affiliation is another marker of belonging: The name, the naming system.

The affiliation to a professional group or community plays likewise its role, sometimes intertwined with other belongings. Perhaps this is of a greater importance than we usually think.

The geographical community, that is the village, the town, the local region can constitute a “community” with a number of functions.

But there are other markers of group belongings as well: Education, language and sociolect, jargons. But also common interests, hobbies.

We are aware of the greater role today of other types of organisations, the NGOs, in the social, economical and political developments in the region.

An academic network of scholars from different fields of research, with different approaches, and theoretical tools can be very fruitful when we try to understand what happens, and what will happen in the region. The free interdisciplinary cooperation that such a network can provide will probably produce “useful knowledge”, to contribute to the basis for decisions hopefully leading to a sustainable and peaceful development.