

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Franz Winter

'Sacred texts' as resources of world-orientation and self-optimisation. A case study in the modern reception of the Indian Upanishads.

Although the category of 'sacred texts' is not in the centre of the religious studies any more as the overall focus on the study of textual sources is nowadays interpreted as too narrow and thereby provoking misconceptions in regard to crucial aspects of religions (Rüpke 2007: 45–52), there is still a rather intense interest in major collections of 'sacred books' of religious traditions, be it the well-known triad of the so-called 'Abrahamic' religions (Tora, Bible, and Quran), be it Buddhist Sutras, the Daoist Yijīng, or important sources of Indian religious history. Most of these texts, though, are not only seen relevant as sources of information on the various religious traditions, their teachings, moral concepts, or rituals, but they are often perceived as objects of reverence and orientation even beyond their mere importance within the religions they belong to. They are interpreted as the source for a kind of transreligiously and transculturally relevant wisdom that might even inspire people without an explicit religious affiliation and particularly those in search of inspiration for their own world-orientation or individual development. We might even speak of a particular 'spiritual' approach towards the religious heritage in the form of major books and other textual sources. A major part of this approach is naturally closely linked to the history of perception of non-European religious and cultural traditions in Western/European/Christian scholarship whose important traits can be traced back to patterns that were shaped in the 19th century. And it makes up part of a specific milieu in contemporary society that is often referred to as 'holistic' or 'spiritual'.

The PhD-project is focused on one particular case of this category of 'sacred texts', the so-called Upanishads that originally belong to Indian religious history. Initially the Upanishads make up part of the so-called 'Veda' whose four parts are the foundational texts of Indian religious history to date. Therein the Upanishads became perceived as the *vedānta*, i.e. the 'end of the Veda', both indicating their place in the collection of texts but also their relevance in regard to their content. In the course of the further development the Upanishads became separated of the Veda and were perceived as a different strand of texts. However, this process took a long time and is closely related to the further history of India and the reception of its religious and cultural heritage in the following centuries—from India as the homeland of the texts to their reception in the Muslim Mughal context and culminating in the eventual arrival of the Upanishads in Europe in the 19th century (Winter 2018). The lengthy process led to the current perception of 'the Upanishads' as a more or less coherent, unified, and even codified religious textual corpus.

As already indicated this special approach to the Upanishads as a source for the development of the individual makes up part of a specific milieu in contemporary society that might be referred to as 'spiritual consumers' or 'holistic milieu'. Historically important traits of this

segment are shaped by patterns that were developed within a religious tradition commonly referred to as ‘esotericism’. It is a vital part of modern religious, viz. ‘spiritual’ culture and should not be underevaluated. As the history of this particular strand is closely linked to the reception of non-European and particularly South Asian and (later) East Asian religions, it is naturally inclined towards material that is connected to Asia.

The PhD-project combines a study of the reception history of the Upanishads in comparison to a sociological-empirical research on a yoga group. Its aim is to isolate the most important characteristics of this specific handling of the Upanishads within contemporary ‘spiritual approaches’ and to place them into its reception history. The empirical part is methodologically based on a discursive analysis of relevant books viz. textual material of the ‘spiritual’ viz. ‘esoteric’ market as well as on a qualitative oriented research within members of a so-called ‘yoga’ group (one the PI has access to in Vienna, or any other comparable group), where members are not only practicing yoga as a variant of sports but as part of their ‘spiritual’ orientation. In addition to the Yoga Sūtras the Upanishads are used in special reading lessons as part of a seemingly ritualistic setting in the weekly or more extended week-end meetings. The twofold approach is not meant to add to an ‘actual understanding’ of the Upanishadic treatises, but to better understand the way the Upanishads are taken as a resource for world-orientation and individual development. The theoretical frame of the Resonance theory might help to systematise the various aspects as it provides an all-encompassing understanding of individual approaches and perceptions that are relevant for the situation today, i.e. a suitable description of major traits of contemporary society ‘in the West’. Consequently, it might serve as a guide and the basis for the study of this particular trait of modern ‘spiritual’ culture.

References

- Rüpke, Jörg 2007. *Historische Religionswissenschaft. Eine Einführung*. Stuttgart.
- Slaje, Walter 2009. *Upanischaden. Arkanum des Veda*. Frankfurt.
- Winter, Franz 2018. ‘Searching for the Hidden “One”: Muslim and Early European Interpretations of the Upanishads’, in: *Numen* 65.1. 28-61.

#