

## New and Unfamiliar: Researching Religious Plurality in Scenic Lucerne

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It was smoke-filled, indeed, as the three Hindu priests performed the fire ceremony to install the new *murti* (statue) of the goddess Thurkkai in the Tamil Hindu temple near Lucerne. For three days in mid-July 05, the local priest Sasitharasarma and two priests from London and Nürnberg (Germany) carried out the extensive rituals to transform a former profane statue made of precious metals into a sacred representation of cosmic power and energy (Skt. *shakti*). The culmination of the rituals on the third day came about as the priest Sasitharasarma ritually gave breath to the goddess statue and thus made the goddess and her *shakti* present in the temple and the very locality. The atmosphere was vibrant, the drum and horn music excessively loud, the priests were anxious to correctly conduct the acts. Some fifty Tamil people, mainly women, had gathered by now, patiently watching the ceremonies. The day before, however, the number had been about five to six times larger as the devotees were allowed to touch the goddess statue and anoint her with water and oil.

Only a few stairs and steps separate this exciting Hindu South Asian world established on the first floor of a former warehouse from the well-arranged and quiet flow of common Swiss life. Hindu Tamil people from the region, i.e., of central Switzerland, knew about this special and auspicious event in the temple. Presumably, no person of Swiss origin had come across the occurrence and only few are aware, at all, that a Hindu temple had existed in the vicinity of touristic Lucerne for years. To the vast majority of people in Lucerne and the same named canton the topic and issue of religion is straightforwardly thought of in Christian terms—the existence of non-Christian religions and their multifarious plurality is new and unknown; it is a rather surprising and unfamiliar phenomenon to most people.

The article will present data and results of the religious plurality project conducted by the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Lucerne. Part 1 presents basic demographic data of religious affiliations in the canton. Part 2 provides a sketch of the plurality of non-Christian religions established in the canton and highlights a few patterns. Part 3 reports on some of the difficulties Swiss people, now a majority, perceive in encountering religious plurality. The third part also indicates which means were employed to document and journalistically process the results of the research project. Part 4 finally describes and reflects upon the involvement of the discipline of the Study of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) in both the documentation and the inevitable influencing of the very field being studied. It became apparent to us among others that some of the groups and societies we studied strongly favored our approach and project, while others, straightforwardly, disavowed and criticized it.

### Demographics

As indicated above, Roman Catholicism is strong and dominant in the municipality and canton of Lucerne. The canton in the center of Switzerland has about 350,000 inhabitants, Lu-

cerne and its conurbations number about 110,000 people. The Swiss Census 2000 specified that 85.6 percent of the canton's population adhere to Christianity, while non-Christian religions are make up a small minority of 4.9 percent of the population. A modest 5.9 percent stated no religious affiliation and 3.7 percent did not provide an answer about their religious identity.

In Christianity there is an internal plurality with 70.9 percent Roman Catholic, 12.2 percent Protestant and 2.5 percent other Christian churches. The latter is constituted by churches like the Old Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches mainly brought by migrants, a variety of evangelical Free Churches and a kaleidoscope of further parishes and societies such as Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, the New Apostolic Church, and Christian Science.

The sector of non-Christian religions with less than 5 percent or about 18,000 people is mainly made up of people of Muslim faith (3.8 percent or 13,000 people) and small pockets of Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish people. With the exception of Jews, who were allowed to settle in the canton from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Islam and Hinduism primarily trace their settlement in the canton after the waves of inflow of refugees and labor migrants from the 1970s onwards. Labor migration from Turkey, political instability in Sri Lanka and civil war in former Yugoslavia had been major reasons for the arrival of these migrants. Buddhism is made up of migrants from Asian Buddhist countries as well as by converts. In addition to these religions, we find a small community of Baha'i followers, a missionary center of Scientology, two other spiritual, esoteric circles as well as three worldview societies. Conversions to new religious and spiritual movements since the 1970s have added to the emerging religious plurality; numerically, however, these have been much smaller than arriving migrants.

### Hidden Plurality alongside Christianity

The local newspapers occasionally reported about an event or festivities taking place among thus-labeled "other" or non-Christian religions. Overall, however, an awareness of the existent religious plurality alongside dominant Roman Catholicism has been present neither in the media, nor in the general public. The stock taking of religions and spiritual groups in the canton, which the department for the Study of Religion undertook in 2002-2005, provided evidence of such a yet small plurality: In Spring 2005, there was the Jewish synagogue, founded in 1912, and the Swiss Jeshiva Talmud College dating back to 1954. In addition, since 2003 the Chassidic Chabad Lubavitch has been active to attract religiously estranged Jews. Islam was fragmented along national and linguistic lines with five Sunnite mosques, a Shiite community, an Islamic Association for Women and a Muslim umbrella organization. Buddhism has organization-wise become established in eight convert groups and centers; two Buddhist migrant temples also existed, maintained by Vietnamese and

Taiwanese Buddhists. Hinduism could be practiced in five locations; the above-mentioned Sri Thurkkai Amman temple sustained by Tamil migrants from Sri Lanka formed the most solid and frequently visited Hindu place. In addition, we documented a further four religious, spiritual, and esoteric groups. The diffuse sphere of New Age offers occasional public lectures, classes and weekend courses. Consequently, due to a lack of permanent organizational establishment, it was not researched and documented.

During the research, it became apparent that the documented religious places varied considerably according to the number of sympathizers or members and organizational structures and facilities. For example, there is the long established Jewish synagogue, although, due to its uncompromising orthodox orientation, its membership has rapidly diminished. There is the splendid Sunnite mosque in a former cinema now decorated with oriental ornaments, inaugurated by Bosnian Muslims in 2000. Likewise, the Sri Thurkkai Amman Hindu temple, the two migrant Buddhist temples and a few of the convert centers as well as the Scientology missionary center are organization-wise well established. On the other side of the spectrum, we find groups or circles like the Brahma Kumaris Gita school which has been regularly offering courses and meditation since 2002, but so far, has a very small number of visitors. The same is true for the two Buddhist convert meditation groups founded in 2003 and the Chalice circle. Baha'i numbers about 30 people, and, although present in Lucerne since 1960, meetings and public lectures still have to be done in a hotel hall.

Overall the majority of organizational foundings came about during the 1990s and early years of the new millennium. Of earlier origin are only the synagogue (1912), a Turkish mosque and the Scientology Center (both in 1976) as well as the Zen center founded by Zen teacher Vanja Palmers in 1988. In view of this recentness and in view of the small numbers of converted followers so far, the religious plurality is juvenile. Although the number of migrants gathering in Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu places of worship is considerably higher than that of convert groups, the plurality is a hidden—and by the wider public hardly noticed. The mosques and the Hindu temple are located in former warehouses and are not recognizable from the outside. With regard to Islam, it is fair to speak of backyard mosques. Furthermore, taking a look at the geographic localization of the non-Christian places of worship, it is apparent that institutions founded by refugees and migrants are on the outskirts and at the periphery of the municipality of Lucerne. In contrast, convert groups and centers were founded more centrally and within easier reach. Though this pattern is, largely, due to fewer financial resources available to migrants, the localization is also of symbolic significance: migrants, whom the majority of Swiss people consider as sojourners and not as immigrants, are not seen as an integral part of Swiss population. They are relegated to less prestigious places—both geographically and metaphorically.

So far only few intra- and inter-religious contacts exist between the various groups. We, therefore, prefer to speak of a plurality rather than a pluralism of religions because a religious pluralism would involve interrelations and channels of communication among the people and groups (Eck 1993; Baumann and Behloul 2005). Muslims have organized them-

selves in an umbrella organization. Nevertheless, apart from this, national and linguistic origin is of prime priority to each grouping. Likewise, the various Hindu and Buddhist groups have almost no contact among each other. The intra-religious plurality is new and unfamiliar to most of them. An attempt by one of the smaller Christian related churches in 2004 to establish a round table of religions in Lucerne and to become active in joint social activities failed straight away. We interpret this as an indicator of the self-centeredness of each group and organization and a lack of interest in inter-religious activities. However, this is not surprising in view of the still recent process of institutionalization of most societies and groups. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church with its strong numerical majority and its symbolic dominance by way of governing church towers in each village of the canton and the center of Lucerne is inter-religiously more engaged. Local parishes maintain good contacts with Muslim leaders and visit mosques. One of the churches even provided space in its lower floor to house the Sri Thurkkai temple from 1991 to 2000. Since the temple's move to more spacious premises necessarily due to the severely increased demand by Hindu devotees, the local Tamil Sai Baba group was able to rearrange the room with an altar for Sai Baba and organize its singing of devotional hymns there.

#### Documentation and Journalistic Processing

Having taken stock of this current situation characterized by a numerically small though, nevertheless, multifarious plurality, we thought about ways of documentation to foster awareness and further an acceptance of the hidden plurality in the wider public. A basic idea was that changes in the religious sphere and landscape are indicative of general changes of society and mirror these. For many Swiss people in the canton, with a loss of the sovereignty of Christianity, due to rapid social changes and ensuing rising numbers of people leaving the Churches (since the 1980s in particular), the emerging religious plurality has been perceived as a threat. Former unquestioned religious certainties became open to question and a matter of choice for the young generation. The social certainty, the Christian bastion, has become shaken, as many perceived these developments. Muslim people and mosques in particular were spotted by a right-wing, populist political party as suspicious and a threat capable of undermining supposedly homogeneous Swiss Christian society. A drawing of the party published in the local newspaper in Autumn 2004 even substituted Lucerne's famous Chapell tower, widely known emblem of the municipality, with a Muslim minaret, suggesting a take over of the town by Muslims. Though the decline in Christianity's century-long dominance in the canton as well as in Switzerland, in general, and the emergence of a religious plurality are not directly related but go back to different causes (Swiss Statistical Office 2003), religious plurality and Muslim presence in particular were targeted as important and menacing reasons for the decline.

In view of this not quite relaxed but contested situation, attention was drawn to the social scientific documentation through various means of journalistic processing. A website was set up to enable internet publicity and easy reach of information ([www.religionenlu.ch](http://www.religionenlu.ch)). Islam specialist Samuel-Martin Behloul wrote a descriptive report of the Muslim land-

scape in central Switzerland, focusing on the activities of the mosques and societies (Behloul 2004). We designed a handy, free-of-charge catalogue, which provides an overview of Christianity's plurality and gives brief individual portraits of the thirty-two non-Christian groups and locations. The catalogue has also two maps, which localize the non-Christian places of worship in the canton and in Lucerne municipality. The municipality, the canton of Lucerne and the research fund of the University of Lucerne financially supported the publication of the catalogue. Issued in Autumn 2004 with an edition of 7000 copies, a second edition was already in need in Spring 2005 (Department for the Study of Religions 2005). Furthermore, filmmaker Kerstin-Katja Sindemann produced nine films of rituals and festivals in the canton celebrated by Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists (Sindemann and Dept. 2005). Finally, a well-received exhibition in May 2005 presented the yet unfamiliar religious plurality to the wider public (<http://www.religionenlu.ch/projekt-science.html>). Parallel to the exhibition, the office of integration of Lucerne municipality launched a poster exhibition in the town, with posters graphically interpreting religious plurality. The posters drew attention to the existence of "other" religions and spiritual groups alongside Christianity in the municipality and canton ([www.stadtluern.ch/default.aspx?pageid=1580](http://www.stadtluern.ch/default.aspx?pageid=1580) or [www.religionenlu.ch/projekt-science-plakate.html](http://www.religionenlu.ch/projekt-science-plakate.html)). Overall, both the offices of integration of the canton and the municipality have been eager to raise awareness of and about "other" faiths and to promote mutual respect.

### The Study of Religions and the Religious Field

The initial aim of the research project was to provide information about the rarely known religious plurality in the municipality and the canton of Lucerne. The mapping of non-Christian plurality strove to raise awareness of the present plurality in order to foster acceptance and acknowledgement step by step. This provision of information addressed towards the wider public provided the spiritual groups and religious traditions with visibility. Whether favored or not, they gained publicity and were pushed (so to speak) before the public. Inevitably, the very field of study was affected by the research, in particular as the approach entailed a journalistic processing of its results. However, as will be explained below, also the research and some of its results were affected by the field itself.

Of course, we informed the groups and centers surveyed about the procedures and the envisaged outcome. Most groups favored the approach to speak about religion without the usually hidden bias of Christianity, on the one hand, and "other" religions on the other. A few even praised the work, as obviously a study-of-religions point of view would refrain from value judgments and treat the various spiritual groups and religious traditions in a similar way. Also, a few of the convert groups foresaw a possible advertising effect of the research. A listing in the online documentation and the handy catalogue would draw attention to their very existence in the canton, including a contact address. New religious movements like the Scientology Center strongly appreciated inclusion in the study. By this their status as a religious or spiritual organization seemed to be acknowledged, a status commonly fiercely debated and questioned continuously.

However, three worldview societies, lodges like the Freemason and Odd Fellows, had stated that they were not to be included in the study and the documentation. According to them, "religion" is fundamentally characterized by its claim to exclusive truth. This would be a claim the lodges definitely would not hold and an inclusion in a research project on religions would deny their self-understanding as a non-religious world view brotherhood. Despite the lodges' idea about themselves, they were included in the study and the catalogue, amongst other criteria, on grounds of their ritual gatherings, their voiced acknowledgement of a higher force or power, and their often explicitly religious symbolism. From our point of view, these societies proved to be highly religious, especially so in a functional understanding of "religious."

Later, at the public presentation of the first edition of the printed catalogue, spokesmen of the lodges strongly opposed their inclusion in the study and their labeling as a "religion" (however, as they understand "religion"). The following weeks saw an exchange of arguments and a round table discussion with the attendance of a local journalist. One of the lodges finally demanded by threat of a lawsuit the destruction of the printed catalogue and a deletion of its name from the online documentation. By official order, we had to appear before the justice of the peace in order to settle the dispute. The hearing's result achieved a typically Swiss compromise: The second edition of the catalogue would refrain from listing the worldview lodges and the lodges would not be listed or named in the forthcoming public exhibition. However, the online documentation would continue to list the three lodges providing, however, the possibility to present a reply by each lodge.

The dispute involved a variety of issues basic to the study of religions: To what extent should the group studied and the scholar's description and understanding overlap; to what extent should a scholar's categorization take into account and guidance the group's self-understanding; how to set the limits of freedom of research?

Despite this tense and time-consuming quarrel, the research project met with appreciation in general. The department has become fairly well known in the wider public as a capable center for information about spiritual groups and religious traditions. In this respect, such a research project certainly is a creative way to point to the department's very existence and its competence. Furthermore, the department has become an acknowledged partner for the administrations of the municipality and the canton. This generated a joint approach to take stock of the existent religious plurality, and, last but not least, financial support for the project. Finally, a non-intended effect is that the department itself has become a non-aligned though active part within the continuously changing scene of religious plurality in the canton. It is not possible for one to position oneself as "out-of-the-field" rather the scholar is always very much in the field as when attending the ceremonies to install a new goddess statue in a diasporic Hindu temple.

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