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## Politics of Perception

### Cooperation with Religious Partners in International Cultural Relations

Michael von Brück

ifa Input 01/2020

Politics needs to mediate between global concerns and local interests. In doing so it touches upon identities on various levels of individual, social and political identity formation. Culture and religion set implicit ways not only of interpreting but also of perceiving reality. This is how basic patterns of identity are shaped. Politics needs to be aware, that there are fundamental differences between religious identities making cultural relations a highly reflective task. Identity is built up always in contrast to the “other”, this means that the “other” is both a challenge to and a necessary condition for one’s own identity indicating an interrelationship. Such interrelationships of identity formation can become the source for cooperation but also for fierce competition, depending on circumstances and the respectful or disrespectful acknowledgement of this mutuality. Religions set the final frame of reference in most diverse aspects of life due to their basic myths interpreting reality as a wholeness, and even if religion as an institution is rejected these frames are still working on an implicate level, shaping values and ways of perceiving and thinking. Therefore, political action needs to take into account these fundamentals of perception in order to be effective, especially under a long-time perspective.

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### Relevance

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Politics is the institutionalised organisation of identities in social groups. Identities are formed individually and collectively by belonging to cultural groups. These groups are shaped by a common language, codes of behaviour and shared “myths” or paradigms concerning the acts to be performed or being forbidden in order to reach a final goal the group identifies with. These paradigms have been collected and executed in organisational patterns which we call “religions”. Beliefs and rituals are part of it, but in many cases these religious presuppositions are hidden or implicit. Today more than ever, internal and international politics has to organise modes of behaviour and a balance of competition and cooperation of diverse actors on a global scale. The difficulty is that this is to be done on the basis of different local identities which do not only shape interests and presuppositions or ways of thinking

as well as values but also the very ways of perception. Therefore, in order to understand the roots of difference between cultures and actors on the political platform, it is vital to understand the explicate and implicate conditions which are engraved in symbols usually expressed in religions.

Furthermore, religions as institutions play an important role in activating social and political actors for their own purposes. In many parts of the world we can observe a “resurgence of religion” actively engaged in shaping and reshaping the political agenda in all dimensions. By becoming aware of these implications and creating an institutional framework for educational purposes a conscientisation would be possible in order to make the setting of goals, strategies and communication in politics more effective.

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## Presupposition: Politics of Perception

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What we experience as reality depends on the mode of perception (aisthesis) and its interpretation. It resonates with all that is. What “is” depends on our conscious realisation of the past as possibility for the future. Since the past is a recollection of imprints into the present modes of consciousness, the “past” is never closed in as much as it shapes the present perception of reality, it is an open space for future developments.

Conscious experience is stored in memory which again is formative for further experience and decision-making in the present. Therefore, modes of consciousness frame and influence human action. Modes of consciousness can be altered by the ability to focus on attention and emotion, and rational thinking is shaped by these factors.

Attention and awareness as well as the balanced interplay of rationality and emotions can be trained by different forms of meditation such as mindfulness, contemplation etc. Mindfulness training may generate two results: (1) a conscious realisation of the interconnectedness of all that is, (2) deep concentration on the present moment of awareness which contributes to the experience of quality over against mere quantity. Both results together are formative: They endow the subject with an identity in resonance as a cognitive-emotional satisfactory state.

Human action depends on perception and evaluation of things and events, which form impressions. Impressions are not objective but conditioned by cultural presuppositions, they are mental constructs expressed in aesthetic structures which again let us perceive reality in conditioned frames. Aesthetic structures are patterns of resonance between the objects represented,

subjective reactions to the same and intersubjective patterns of exchange or communication. Communication is a basis for collective action or politics. In other words, the structure and performance of politics does not depend on the last member of this chain (communication) only, but on the very processes of perception: We need to be aware not only of a perception of politics, but also of a politics of perception, and this awareness depends on mindful practice looking into one’s own mind. This would help to realise and overcome presuppositions and prejudices in the intercultural communication of politics. Even values like democracy, freedom, justice etc. are culturally not invariant. Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanism of mental construction which is performative, conditioned and conditioning at the same time. The widest frame of such conditioned structures is religion, because religions offer an imagined frame of space and time which suggests an origin and end of what is beyond actual perception, but based on sensual impressions and reflection. This “hidden frame” is the very precondition of any perception. Becoming aware of the patterns in which one perceives, thinks, feels, speaks and acts is the most important insight of self-reflexivity. This is an individual as well as collective demand. One can become aware of one’s pattern of thinking by an awareness directed onto the mental processes themselves. Such an awareness is called mindfulness or meditation. Hence, mindfulness is much more than just a means for stress-reduction. It is a fundamental precondition for an unbiased perception that would lead to proper understanding of oneself and the other – both being in continuous resonance. Since such a perception is essential for successful communication, mindfulness has a political dimension. It is the expression of proper resonance with reality as it is and not just reality as we want it to be.

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## Religion

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What is religion? The term in most cases describes a social-institutional reality as it has been developed in European-American history (churches). In Asian, African or Near Eastern contexts, however, this pattern of interpretation is insufficient and requires both extension and abstraction: Religions are symbolic systems of meaning. They integrate differences (different stories about the past and future, different social interests etc.) into an encompassing story which is enacted in rituals, systems of thinking and ethical frameworks. Religions integrate individual concerns and social demands. They provide frameworks of identity and at the same time enable or inhibit individual development in thinking, feeling and action. In doing so they activate phantasy in order to cope with suffering or change in life. Religions coordinate human expectations and experiences in great stories (myths) which have basically four functions: (1) they open the mind for a sense of mystery which is supposed to be beyond all perceivable reality as a source for creativity and hope to overcome unsatisfactory experiences, (2) they represent a cosmological intuition of the Oneness or Interdependency of reality, expressed in the idea that God is or resonates in all reality, (3) they establish and legitimise a social order and enact rules for long-term coherence in society, giving contracts and treaties final reference, (4) they set pedagogical examples about how a human life should be lived decently. By establishing a resonating connectivity in all areas of life religions project the potentially “other” or “strange” into a coherent story or image so that understanding an utterly complex and unforeseeable reality becomes possible. Religions live from the experience that underlying all chaos in life (individually and collectively) there is a yet to be discovered cosmos. This “cosmic harmony” may be

called God or Heaven or Beauty or Truth – it is always something not yet given but being reached by proper observances (rituals, belief, ethics, spiritual training etc.).

At the same time religions are expressions of spiritual experiences. Spirituality is the conscious reflection of the mind in the process of understanding its own mechanisms. Spirituality is awareness of the vast variety of mental processes as states of consciousness. In complete and thorough concentration the mind can reflect on itself like in a mirror, so that it becomes clear, freed from the veil of prejudice and egocentric obstruction of perception. In this way the spiritual experience often becomes a source of critique of religious and political constructions on the dogmatic, the aesthetic and the institutional level, that is to say religion has an inbuilt source of the critique of religion and politics.

Throughout history we observe that religions are many and appear in diversity. With the development of agriculture and settlements about 10 000 years ago the tremendous variety of mythical stories and religious identities was reduced, standardised and concentrated. The invention of urban life, the nation state, mass media etc. had further impact on the standardisation of culture. This process goes on. Today it is for example “Hollywood” that produces standardised myths which inspire and inform people across cultures. However, these myths (like Star Wars or Harry Potter) draw on ancient mythical images such as the hero, children-parents conflicts, maturation, fighting evil forces etc. and transpose them into the present (technological) world. They get expressed in different forms of art which inspire human emotions as triggers for individual and collective action. Thus, in myths we experience a resonance with past generations as an inspiration which would be charged emotionally in order to achieve identification and a certain collective

identity. Many political conflicts today reflect this kind of resonance. A striking example is South Asia where two nuclear powers (India and Pakistan) not only struggle on the level of competing states but also fight internal cultural conflicts between modes of life and patterns of socialisation based on different myths in the sense mentioned above – the Hindu and Islamic models of organising social life. Another example is China, because this issue is also a major factor in the confrontation between China and “the West”, i.e. collective versus individual constructions of human dignity and obligation. More conflict lines could be mentioned, and even in Europe the old confessional divide between Eastern Orthodox versus Western Latin cultures plays an underlying role for the institution of the state, its “sanctity” or foundations which are to be given priority to any legalised constitutionality. To understand these processes is vital for an effective rational argument for certain political solutions of conflicts. In other words, this dynamism needs to be made conscious in order to make rational arguments effective.

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### **Secularisation and the Power of Religion**

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During the 19th and 20th century there was – at least in Europe – the expectation of the end of religion due to the development of science and political emancipation processes. This was called “secularisation”. What we observe today, however, is a resurgence of religions all over the world. Even in central Europe “secularisation” is not the mere disappearance of religion or religiosity, but has turned into a secularity which seems to express itself in three tendencies: (1) the religious monopoly of powerful religious institutions (churches) has been broken, (2) state and religion have become separated and (3) the religious spectrum became pluralised in as much as

different religions and even atheism are protected by law on a more or less equal level. In other political systems such as India the “secular state” merely stands for protecting religious diversity in its cultural and institutional-social aspects. Religions intermingle and live side by side all over the globe. Due to plurality, which is a fact, different forms of pluralism, which is the conscious and social acceptance of that fact, have emerged, and there are two notable worldwide developments: (1) a turn towards spirituality or (2) a turn towards traditionalism or fundamentalism. The first one stands for interiority, interconnectedness, differentiation and continuous search for specific mental experiences transcending the rational explanation of the world, the second one stands for the search for security, identity, reduction to clear cut answers in all walks of an uncertain life.

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### **Understanding Religion as a Source for Motivation**

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Understanding is a process of partial and graded identification which makes subject and object enter into mutual dependencies. Understanding implies interrelationality and intersubjectivity between the own and the other. Understanding is dependent on the conditions of perception and reflection which are culturally conditioned by language and other social patterns of behaviour, because cultures and languages determine what a possible “object” of perception and cognition might be. The result of these processes is a continually changing platform of levels of understanding, which integrate contradictions – the other becomes the own. This happens also when religions (religious systems, beliefs etc.) and/or political systems meet.

As we argue, religions are systems of faith, philosophical views, sets of personal experiences or organised hope in view of the irremovable suffering in the world; they are both ethical rules and political systems which legitimise or criticise power and rule. Yet, religion is still “something else”, which can be described as a transcending urge to find ultimate answers to the final questions of life and death, and this is what motivates people and peoples in their deepest consciousness. Therefore, religion is of utmost political importance. For this “something else” motivates surrender and self-giving, both in positive and negative, constructive and/or deconstructive ways. Yet, how can “positive” or “negative” be determined? Religions answer in different and contradicting ways: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, the great religions of Asia, tend to organise their views in polarities – good and evil are mutually conditioning, for both are explicatory processes of one and the same reality which itself transcends good and evil. On the contrary, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the semitic religions of West Asia, tend to antagonise good and evil as duality: The good has been revealed by God in his commandments which demand a clear distinction between good and evil. Therefore, knowledge of the good is possible and this is what humans ought to fight for, even sometimes with violence.

Cultural identities are very much shaped by the implications rooted in this basic difference, but today these different world views are on a path of encounter and clash, as mentioned above with regard to China and India versus the Western individualistic anthropology and world view. It is obvious that “the Eastern way of thinking” creates a lot of fascination in the complex societies of the industrialised world not only because of the presence of Chinese and Indian people in Europe and the Americas (migration), but also in view of the fascination of Hindu and Buddhist

philosophy and practice by millions of Europeans and Americans. Therefore, in the future religions in general and Judaism and Christianity in particular will be very much concerned with a discussion of these questions.

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## Clash of Identities

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Religions are fundamental for cultural identities: identities which people have and identities which individuals and collective bodies are in search for. The conflict of different identities (including their religious roots) has much to do with almost all contemporary political conflicts around the globe. This is why the call for tolerance, mutual acceptance and dialogue is so important, for otherwise cross-cultural understanding would be impossible. To implement tolerance, however, is difficult, because identity is related to the quest for psychological security and the affirmation of value of one’s own lifestyle in view of the plurality of ways (languages, cultures, religions, ways of life), a security which seems to be threatened under the impact of a globalising economy that creates the loss of traditional identities and therefore psychological as well as political instabilities all over.

This is why individuals or whole groups of people try to take refuge in newly constructed identities of dogmatic systems and fundamentalist patterns of behaviour not allowing pluralism and tolerance. Here, religion is used as an instrument for psychological and social stability. For centuries religions have been clashing with each other, and these clashes are enacted with utter violence because they are rooted in fear and connected to deepest values and convictions. Religious conflicts, therefore, are conflicts at depth. In the past and also today those clashes have created apocalyptic expectations among “fundamentalists”, in the Near East, in Central



Asia, in Europe, the Americas and elsewhere: the cosmic death as well as visions of New worlds and a New creation. Both, fear and the excitement of new potentials in creativity are the stuff these expectations have been made of.

Any group or corporate body can be understood as a generalisation of certain identity features and characteristic marks, as a unity of a relatively stable structure. This structure is shaped not only by cognitive elements but also by specific emotional and physical occurrences. However, what is being perceived as the other is often one's own shadow, i.e. the non-realised aspects of one's own opportunities. Even more, as has been explained before, the other is perceived through the windows of acquired models of perception. Often the non-realised is the repressed, and this process of repression can be understood in the context of individual biography as well as in the context of whole cultural systems. The other as the repressed aspect of one's own identity will be fought against the more and the closer it comes to our own potentials which are not realised or cannot be realised.

In order to simplify the processes of identification or communication usually just a few stereotype features of a certain people are being absolutized: It is the Christian or the Jew or the Muslim who is supposed to have certain specific characteristics. However, in most cases they can be identified as cultural stereotypes which have developed historically. Cultural or religious identity is being mediated in the acceptance of such stereotypes which can only appear and can only be established insofar as the own is being experienced as different from the other. To simplify and generalise this point: Identification is the process of delimitation.

Thus, the other is vital for creating one's own identity, identity is created in the tension of partnership. However, under two conditions the other becomes the stranger, which needs to be discerned as a different category: (1) if it is not possible to identify and understand features or certain special traits, because either contrasting or analogous experiences are lacking in one's own socialisation, (2) if there are reasons – caused by the individual biography or political constellations – that the other becomes a threatening factor to my own identity, usually due to either frustrated fascination or conflicting claims of power. Here, the other is not the counterpart any more or partner of one's own formation of a corporate body.

It is interesting that in the myths of religions and in fairy-tales the stranger or the strange often appears as the ambiguous visitor: It is a stranger who knocks at the door and later is revealed as a god. This is the typical ambiguity of the other. He is the stranger who requires his hosts to leave their own identity to grow beyond their own individual or corporate body of identity, but he is also the mirroring of one's own possibilities. The strange turns into the enemy if the other has not been grasped as a chance but if one needs to delimitate oneself and seems to be able to establish one's own physical as well as mental individual and corporate identity on the expense of the other, that is only if one can eliminate the other. This is why often the stability of a corporate identity or a group is constructed on the basis of the image of an enemy. This image can develop its own dynamics in the reciprocal sense we discussed before. *Within the framework of perception of the enemy we see exactly what we want to see in order to stabilise our own identity which has been threatened by the change from the perception of the other to the stranger and the enemy.*

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## Identity in Resonance

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The forming of tradition in cultures is a process of self-identification through discovery of the other. The individual needs to belong to a group, and the development of a “we” (including its linguistic and mental consistency) depends on the assimilation and dissimilation concerning the respective other. That is to say: “We” is always the counterpart or the resonance of an “other”.

The other is different in being the other, and as such it becomes the source of our own self-understanding and self-affirmation: You know who you are when you know who you are not or you don't want to be. Social, political and religious identification works by looking at the other through the glasses of this self-affirmation, and the whole process is a reciprocal formation of identity. This is what can be called identity in resonance.

Humans live simultaneously in different identities, depending on the context. (A person coming from Bavaria has a certain identity and difference over against people coming from other parts of Germany, but identified in the horizon of the whole of Europe we identify ourselves as Germans, Italians, French and so on, primarily not any more as Bavarians etc. And if we identify ourselves with regards to Africa we differentiate between Africans and Europeans.) This is to say: Depending on the context we develop a relational alterity with regard to the others. Identity is not a fixed system but a relational process that interacts in its very formation with other relational processes which are called identities, too.

In similar ways we can understand religious identity: Confessional identities lose their significance under the horizon of dialogue with other religions, and the struggle between religions

loses significance in view of widespread atheism or atheistic consumerism – here it is only important whether you are “religious” or not, as has been the experience in former communist countries. We can develop a pyramid structure of identities: What identity is, depends on the horizons or the perspectives in which this identity is constructed and incorporated. It is the model of Chinese boxes: Various identities can contain each other for smaller boxes are contained in the respective larger ones without collapsing the smaller ones.

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## Interreligious Identity

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However, we have to consider that the process of forming identity in the history of religions is much more complex because (1) in one religion, culture or nation different identities are mixed with each other and (2) in different relational aspects of existence different constructs of identity can become dominating. In other words: The weight of an identity depends on the other over against which stability needs to be achieved. Or to put it in more general terms: Identity changes according to intercultural relational patterns.

Even migrants try to build up a new regional identity in sticking to a socio-religious group that guarantees the continuity of the regionalised religious identity. The United States are a good example. It follows that to counterbalance processes of the absolutization of religious identity (in fundamentalist, nationalist movements) we need two factors to be emphasised: the local-regional identity and the global identity of one humankind at the same time.

The level of interreligious identity, that might be mediated by spiritual practice, has influence on the local and regional identity, and we have to make conscious efforts to link these different



levels. But they are not the same and should not be confused. To embrace a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu in an interreligious conference that radiates a certain appealing intellectual and spiritual climate, is something else and different from embracing a Jew, a Muslim or a Hindu in my neighbourhood. It is not just different because different aspects and socio-political influences play a role, but it is different in so far as different levels of identity are being touched upon. There is a difference between cognitive identity based on insight into the interdependency of humankind, and an emotional identity that creates neighbourhood and local belonging. Both play a role in human societies, but to acknowledge the difference and respect the emotional dynamics of people on different levels is extremely important for any political programme and action which is apt to reach not only intellectuals in the classroom but people in the streets. Here, we need to have a clear perception of this difference in order to understand and resolve political conflict on local levels.

In order to build a lasting interreligious understanding and cooperation without provoking new tensions we have to keep in mind these different levels of identity and give them their proper place. This means, that political rationality can be more effective when the level of local difference of identities (culture and religion) is being dialectically *“aufgehoben”* (transcended and preserved at the same time) in order to find acceptance. To spell this out in each specific case is a decisive aspect of the art of politics.

Each tradition forms a unique identity and still can integrate others. This is precisely what is happening all over the world today. Religions are in a fundamental crisis facing an economised culture into which the world seems to develop. This is similar in India, Japan, Israel, Europe or the Americas. All religions, therefore, face the

question what their unique and important contribution for human beings is. They are in need not just to legitimise or strengthen their religious institutions but to offer a service to human beings on the basis of their original impulses of mutuality and comprehensive interrelationship. Usually this has been expressed as the value of love and compassion.

The point is that in the present partnership of religions on all levels of human expression and formation a common identity emerges which has not yet been there in the respective traditions and therefore has no model we could draw on. Yet, today gradually a new paradigm emerges whether we want it or not: People who share emotionally and intellectually as well as socially in different religions are new models of mutually inclusive identities. This phenomenon has been called *“multiple citizenship”* in different religions. It is an old practice in India, China, Africa and indigenous cultures, but it is new to the Judaic, Christian and Islamic worlds.

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## European Identity

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Today, humans need to consciously develop a global and local identity at the same time. Experience of the last decades is proof of the fact that a regional and national identity will not be given up in globalisation processes, so the two levels need to be balanced. This is a task for the institutions of culture, including religions. Political rhetoric and cultural discourse of the mainstream actors need to be aware of the mutuality of these levels of identity formation.

Europe is built upon an *“eccentric identity”* (Rémi Brague). This means that the cultural and/or geographical sources come from outside and need to be acquired in long processes of learning: this can be seen with Athens and Jeru-

salem. Geographically Greece is part of Europe, but the languages (ancient Greek and Latin) have to be learnt as foreign languages, and Jerusalem is outside Europe both in geographical and cultural terms. Therefore, European identity is something precarious and not given for granted, it needs to be acquired by a specific awareness to the problem, in terms used before: “the other” and “the own” are not only intermingling, but “the other” constitutes “the own” mediated by a process of acquisition. This could well be one of the reasons for the European restlessness and creativity in history. One additional source in the Middle Ages is the Arabic civilization which is to be interpreted not only as a mediator of Antiquity to Europe but as a source for inspiration in philosophy, sciences and arts. Today, this is to be extended by becoming aware of the European interplay with Asian, African and American cultures. European colonialism is a direct result of this dynamism, because on the one hand it has been and is the exploitation of the other for economic and political gains, but on the other hand it always has been and is even today the missionary zeal or marketing strategy of propagating the “better religion and/or culture”, be it in terms of beliefs, the benefits of science, the more humanistic attitude towards human freedom, the blessing of democracy or whatever. Since the 17th century the marks and traces of European culture are visible all over the globe, vice versa the cultural possibilities and challenges of these continents are becoming more and more influential in Europe. It requires a mindful integration in a way that we had shortly mentioned already with regard to religion. Europe is in the making by the way of these exchanges, it is not – and never has been – an encapsulated entity. It is a process of resonances in understanding the other as the own and vice versa.

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## Ecological Identity

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Even the ecological crisis has the dimension of an identity problem which could be addressed by a different awareness and/or mindfulness. It is a truism that human beings are part of nature and subjects of the manipulation of nature at the same time. A different attitude needed for a change in life-styles requires a shift in perception, interpretation and motivation: The realisation of the interdependence and awareness of the present, the two aspects just mentioned, should lead towards a creativity for newly adjusting the relationship of the subject and its environment. Mindfulness training allows to focus on the interdependency of insight and emotion, and only this combination will lead to a different sustainable frame of acting. How? By mindfulness the processes of nature become a source of joy. Joy motivates and stretches time, it allows a more sustainable way of life, for it is the experience of interconnectivity itself that gives satisfaction. How is this possible? Because of the extension of identity, an “embedded identity”, into a greater wholeness which in religious parlance was called “God” the “Transcendent” or the “Cosmic Order”. This assures the individual of meaning and purpose with consequences for the social and political frame of human relationships: It is not by exhortation, threat and menace that motivation for renouncing an excessive consumerism and struggle for power is achieved, but by the experience of mindful encounter with things and events, for this mindfulness generates joy and satisfaction. Mindfulness can be taught and learned. Countless studies show that aesthetic education will enhance cognitive, emotional and social capabilities in a sense of an experience of cooperation, participation and mindful organisation. The joy of being able to express oneself creatively has a healing effect on the psyche and reduces exploitative patterns of behaviour. Meditation practice stabilises the mental and emotional

system and enables one to consciously govern one's own emotional balance and search for stability. If we want (and need) to heal the world, it is necessary that we also heal ourselves. All that is required is a reset of education in this respect, an enhancement of experiencing and understanding interconnectivity in all dimensions of life, and there are notable examples of it worldwide.

**The author**

Prof. Dr. Michael von Brück is Professor of Religious Studies and was Head of the Inter-Faculty Program in Religious Studies at the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich until 2014. He studied Theology, Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy in Rostock, Bangalore and Madras, followed by a five-year lectureship in India. He has held visiting professorships in the United States, Thailand, Latvia, India and Japan. He is a member of various scientific bodies worldwide and was an Advisor to the Publishing Program of World Religions (Suhrkamp / Insel). He is an Honorary Professor at the Catholic University of Linz since 2014. Numerous publications have appeared on his main topics Buddhism, Hinduism and intercultural dialogue.

The leitmotif of Michael von Brück's work is the connectivity of Science, Art and Spirituality as the basis for a transformation of our lifestyle. This has three aspects: Integrity of consciousness, especially the unity of knowledge and emotion; Intercultural communication, especially between European and Asian religions; Courage and creativity when trying out an ecological life practice.

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