

# Researching Translations of the Sacred:

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Approaches from  
Translation  
Studies

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October 14, 2017

# Interdisciplinary research on the travel of the sacred:

**Useful to examine two important categories:**

- **‘religion’**
- **‘translation’**

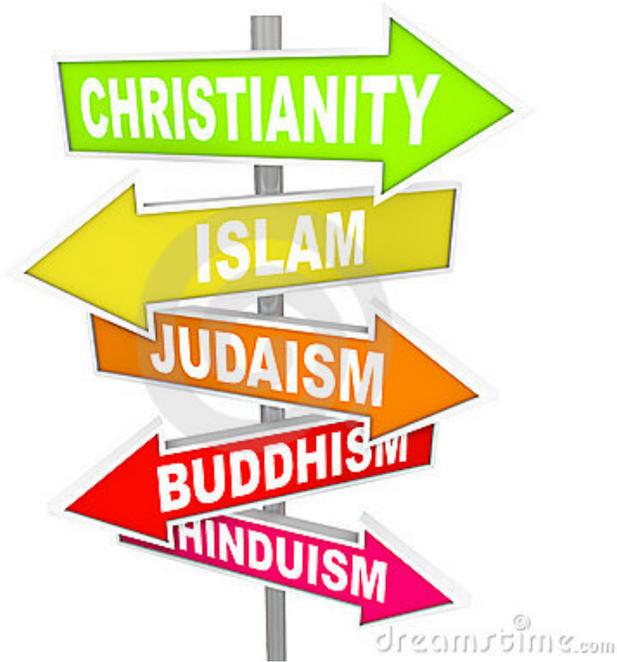
**Do these terms mean different things in different cultures and contexts?**

# Examining Categories:

- **Translation/Translation Studies**
- **Religion/Religious Studies**

Paying attention to “the way that conceptual metaphors can and do structure entire approaches to a subject matter and indeed the constitution of entire disciplines” is very important (Tymoczko, 2010: 110).

# What is Religious Studies?



- **Not theology**
- **Has disciplinary roots in:**
  - **Theology**
  - **Social anthropology**
  - **History**
  - **Culture Studies**
- **A discipline that critically examines**
  - **'religion' as a category that can be studied**
  - **engages in comparative study of religions**
  - **institutionalised and popular religious practices**
  - **studies religion in all its socio-political ramifications**
- **Status of religious studies as an academic discipline globally.**

# What is 'religion'?

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964):

There is a confusion of terms and 'religion' is "notoriously difficult to define."

Important for us to scrutinize new words and new developments in meanings of old words.

Because the way we use words is a significant index of how we think.

# Terms for 'religion' in other languages:

Do all languages have a linguistic term for 'religion' that mean exactly the same?

- **Sanskrit/Hindi=**  
*dharma* (duty to god, king, parents, husband)
- **Tamil=**  
*samayam* (also used for 'time')  
*matam* (to be furious, in a state of intoxication)

Examples from other languages?

"...there are today and have been in the past relatively few languages into which one can translate the word 'religion'—and particularly its plural, 'religions'—outside Western civilization" (Smith, 2009 [1964]: 7).

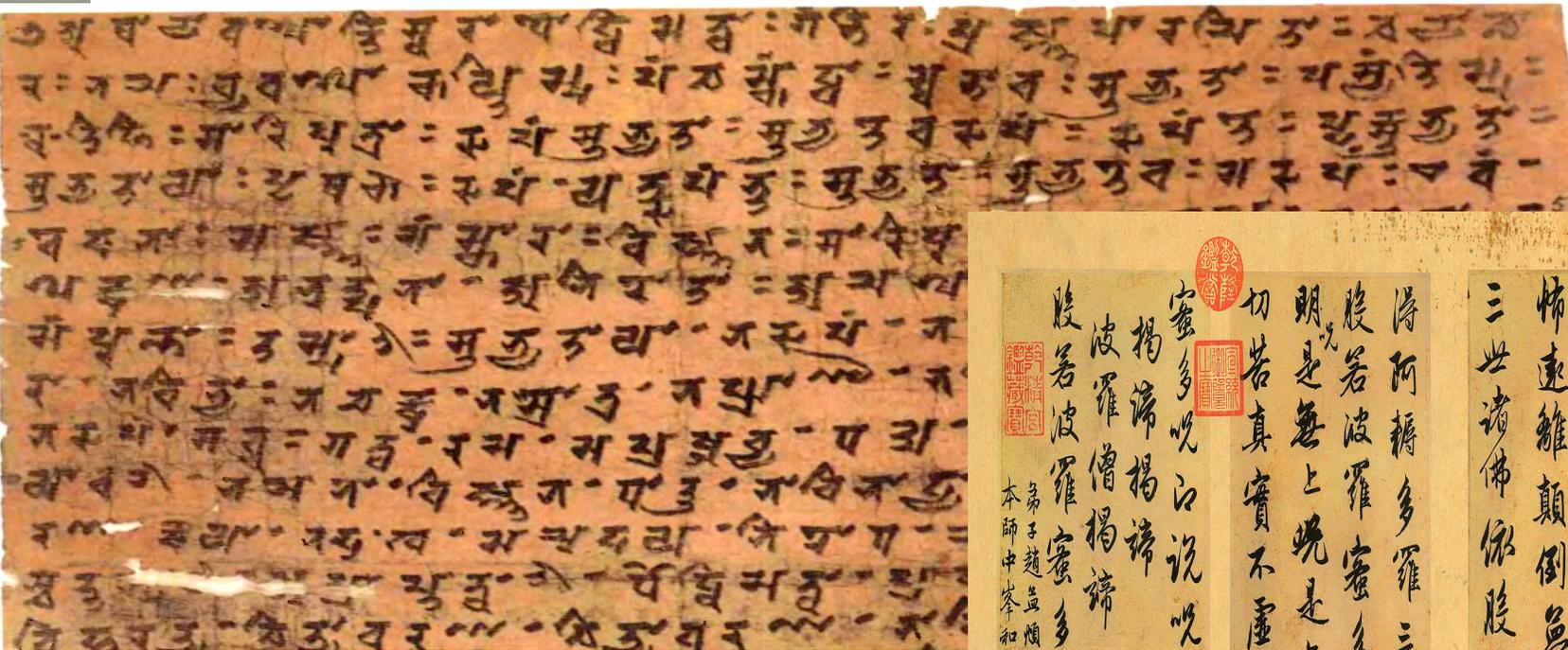
# Translation is not a:

- Neutral
- Transparent
- Invisible
- Apolitical

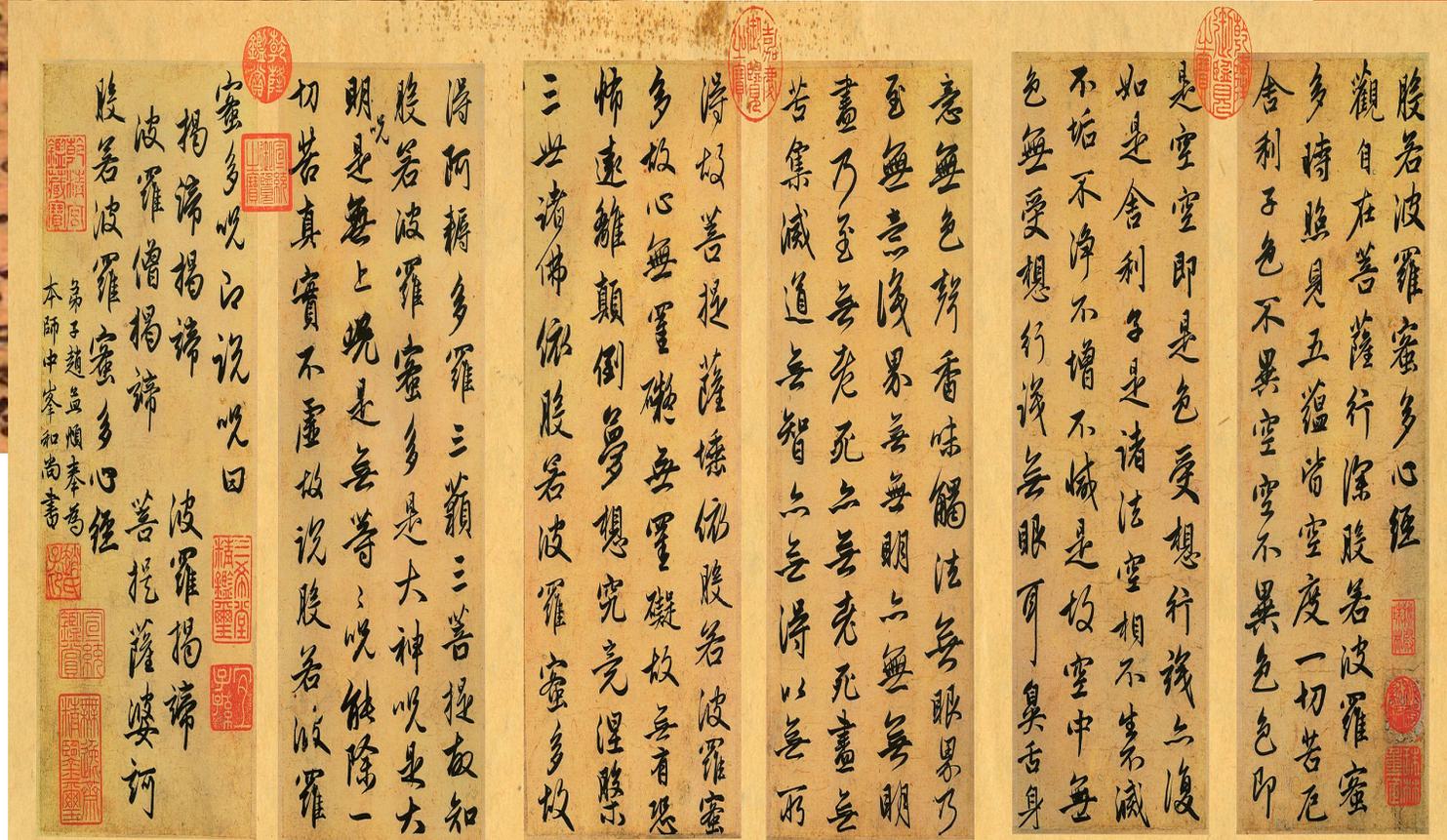
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**But most religions find it useful to make this claim!**

# Exercise 1



Paired Discussion:  
See PDF entitled  
Exercise 1



# Questions: theoretical and methodological

# Research Focus

- **Linguistic focus:**

**Translation practices and norms: metaphors; phrases; idioms; figurative language; allegory**

- **Interdisciplinary Focus:**

**Critical thinking on understanding and studying the nature of the links between religion and translation.**

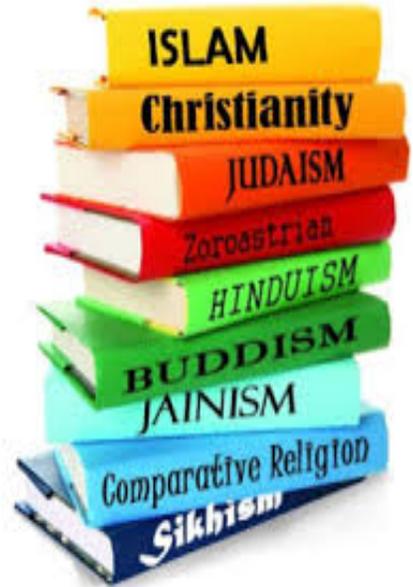
# Formulating a Research question...

- **What kinds of research questions can we formulate from a TS perspective?**
- **What TS methods can we use to answer these?**

# Large questions from Translation Studies

- **What counts as ‘translation’ in different religious cultures?**
- **How do translations de/Construct or define ‘knowledge’ about religions?**
- **What attitudes do religions display towards translation?**

# What would you consider the main components of a 'religion'?



- Sacred
- Scripture
- Faith/belief
- Ritual
- Worship—  
places of  
worship,  
objects  
worshipped
- Deity
- Mysticism
- Myth
- Festivals
- Conversion
- Institutions

Which one of these components are “translated”?

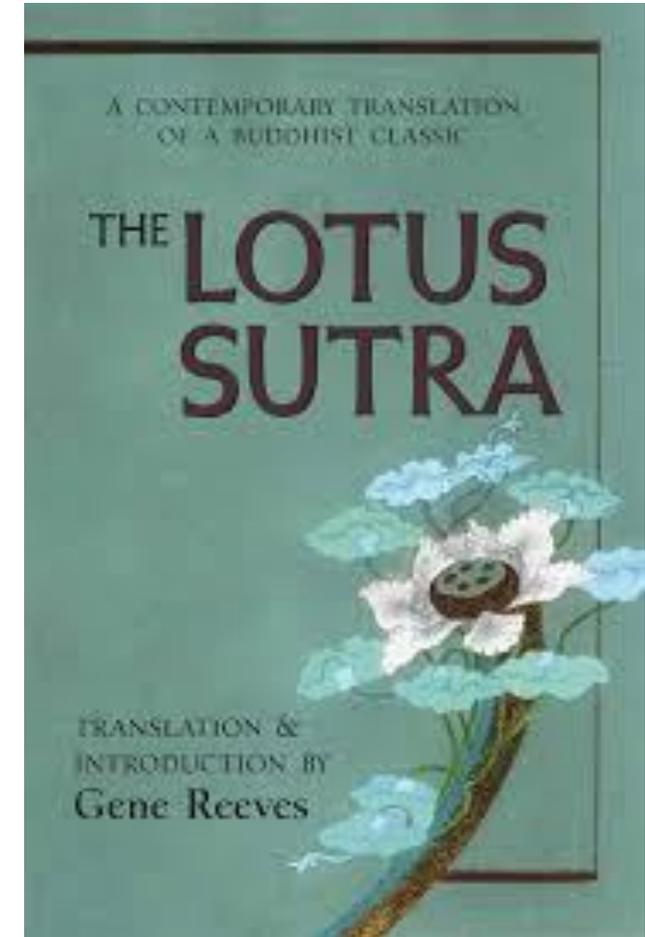
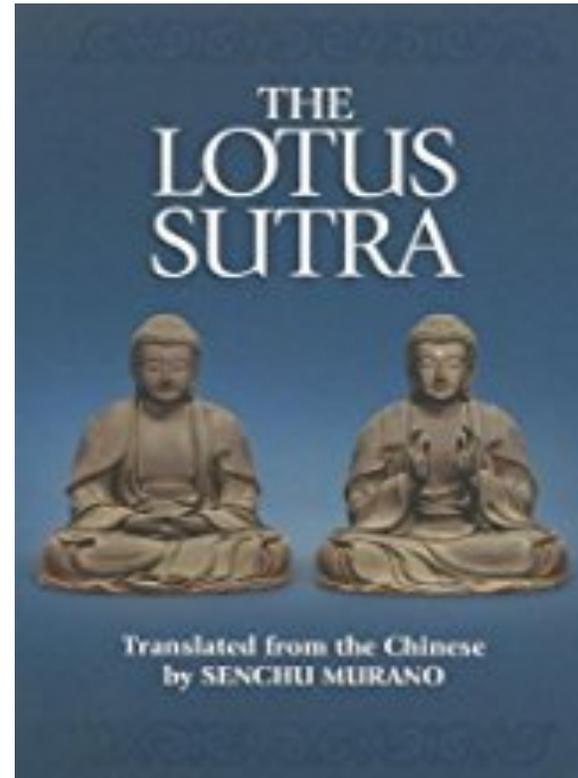
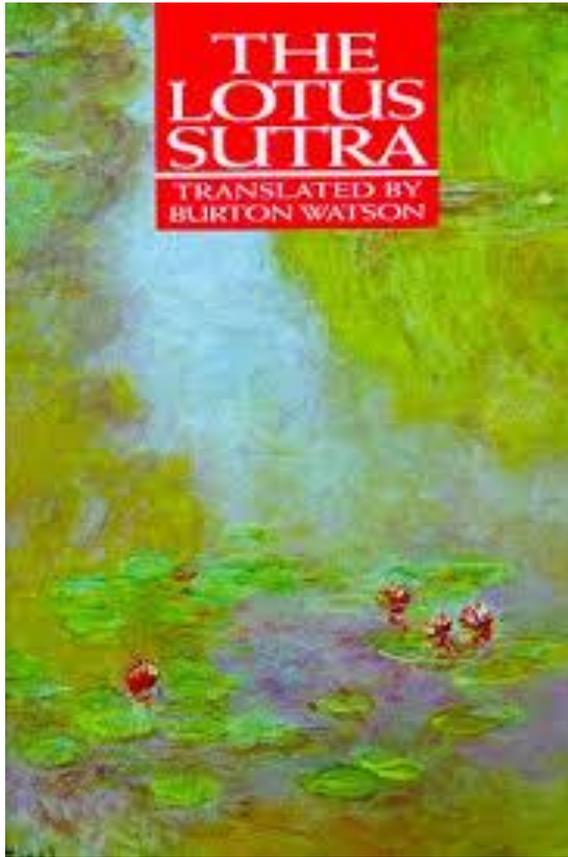
# Research Areas and Topics 1

- ◉ **Un/translatability and equivalence**
- ◉ **Institutions and agency: il/legitimate translations or translators**
- ◉ **Censorship and power**
- ◉ **Collaborative translations of sacred texts**
- ◉ **Paratexts and sacred translation**
- ◉ **Translation as a religious experience**
- ◉ **Translation as religious learning/ master-novice relationships and hierarchies in learning through translation**

# Research Areas and Topics 2

- ◉ **Translation history (including retranslations/relay translations)**
- ◉ **Colonialism and Imperial policies**
- ◉ **Missions/missionaries**
- ◉ **Gender, translation and the sacred**
- ◉ **Faith communities/conversion**
- ◉ **Interpreting and sacred contexts**

## Exercise 2



*Exploring Online Reception of the Lotus Sutra in Translation*

## *An opening quote ...*

*“The teachings of modern Buddhism, however, circulate freely, their meanings uncontrolled, open to the readings of anyone able to access them, their truth determined not by tradition but by the dynamics of discourse.”*

(J. Snodgrass, “Discourse, Authority, Demand: The Politics of Early English Publications on Buddhism”, in Bhushan, Garfield and Zablocki (eds.), *TransBuddhism*, UMP 2009, p.22)

# *Some background ...*

- **The *Lotus Sutra***

- (“Sūtra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma”)
- Chinese: *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經
- Sanskrit: *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*

- **Key text in the Mahayana Buddhist canon**

- **Central to certain schools/sects, particularly within Eastern Buddhism – e.g Japanese Nichiren 日蓮**

# *Names and Acronyms in the Forum*

- **Nichiren Buddhism** – founded by Nichiren 日蓮 (1222-1282)
- **Nichiren Shū** 日蓮宗 (broad umbrella term for different Nichiren schools – also a loose organization, the Nichiren Buddhist International Center in the US)
- **Nichiren Shoshū** 日蓮正宗 (a ‘breakaway’ school)
- **SGI – Soka Gakkai (创价学会) International** (originally affiliated with Nichiren Shoshū, but radical split / excommunication in early 1990s. Now wholly a *lay society*.)
- **BDK – Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai** 佛教传道协会 – “Society for the Promotion of Buddhism”. Japanese-based, with extensive Western presence.
- **Risshō Kōsei-kai** 立正佼成会 – Another Japanese international Buddhist society, again focused on the *Lotus Sutra*; again, it’s a *lay society*.

# Exercise 2a

See PDF entitled **Exercise 2** to consider the following questions:

- 1. *In Posts 2, 3 and 5, which are the participants' preferred translations – and why? What problems are referred to?*
- 2. *Posts 6 - 12 take the discussion in a different direction. What points are made for and against the **Watson** version?*
- 3. *What is the tone of the comments made in the following posts?*
  - *Post 8 – paragraph 1*
  - *Post 9 – paragraph 1*
  - *Post 10*
  - *Post 11*

## Exercise 2b

*4. What Research Questions could you formulate for this data?*

*Some Possible Research Questions for consideration...*

- 1. What different claims are made for the validity and “authenticity” of particular translations over others?**
- 2. To what extent is “authenticity” a dynamic emergent category in reception of the sacred?**
- 3. How are competing discourses of the sacred negotiated or perpetuated through the interactions of the participants?**
- 4. How are translator paratexts invoked or rejected in the discussions?**

# Session Review

## Some Research Topics and Questions:

- **Text Selection**—which texts are given the status of scripture?
- **Function**—How is the text/scripture used?
- **Language**—Which languages are considered appropriate' for sacred use?
- **Readers**—How do they respond to a translation?
- **Historical context**—when were translations commissioned? Why were they re-translated?
- **Equivalence**—what is it in a sacred context?
- **'Untranslatables'**—are there any? How are they handled?