

The Relationship of Religion and Medicine

Reading the “four-root Tantra” (rGyud bzhi) with Niklas Luhmann’s Sociological “Systems Theory”

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Sociological differentiation theory holds that in evolved societies, the “systems” of religion and medicine serve special functions for the society. Thus, there is a more or less strict division of labour between these two. But can such an ideal-typical difference be of help in analysing the pre-modern relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan medicine? The talk will outline differences between religious and “secular-medical” conceptions of the etiology of illnesses, and healing, in pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism. The foundational text of Tibetan medicine, the “four-root Tantra” (rGyud bzhi), for example, offers competing frameworks of explaining the causes of illness and healing. And at least in certain respects a clear division between the “systems” of “religion” and “medicine” can be observed in pre-modern Tibet.

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