

Ulrich Berner (1948–2026)

By Oliver Freiburger

On August 26, 2026, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Berner passed away at his home in Bayreuth after a long battle with cancer. He was an extraordinary scholar, teacher, and mentor. I am writing this obituary in English to signal his global reputation and the enormous impact he had on so many international students and scholars, especially from Africa, an impact that most colleagues in German-speaking circles may not be aware of.

Beginning in 1967, Ulrich Berner studied Theology, Philosophy, History of Religions, Indology, and Buddhist Studies at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, where he received his doctoral degree in 1974. His thesis, supervised by Carsten Colpe, analyzed the concepts of soul, immortality, and resurrection in the work of the Alexandrian theologian and philosopher Origen (2nd/3rd century) and argued that the classical phenomenology of religion had failed to explain such concepts adequately. Subsequently, he was a postdoctoral fellow in the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 13 (*Orientalistik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Religions- und Kulturgeschichte des Vorderen und Mittleren Orients*), then assistant professor (*wissenschaftlicher Assistent*) of History of Religions at Göttingen (1978–1984). In 1980 he completed his *Habilitationsschrift*, which was published by Harrassowitz in 1982 (*Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffes*). In this book he develops a heuristic model of syncretism that offers a refined terminology for the analysis of religious encounter, based on and advancing sociological systems theory. Analyzing, as a case study, the encounter of Christianity and philosophy in Origen's work, he demonstrates the model's applicability for a concrete historical context. Between 1980 and 1984, he also taught, as visiting professor, at the universities of Hamburg, Bonn, and Bremen and was a Heisenberg fellow in 1984–1985. In 1986 he was appointed professor and chair of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) at the University of Bayreuth, where he taught ever since, even beyond his official retirement in 2013.

When he joined Bayreuth University, which was to become a renowned center for African studies, Ulrich Berner developed an additional interest in African religions, first in the religious concepts, imagery and symbolism appropriated by African novelists, then also in new indigenous religious movements in Africa. His activities within the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 214 (*Identität in Afrika*) led to the supervision of multiple doctoral theses. Over many years he was involved in African studies and brought a large number of African scholars of religion to Bayreuth – as Ph.D. students, visiting lecturers, Humboldt scholars, or guest researchers – and over time these activities made Bayreuth the major center for the study of African religions that it is today.

In his research, Ulrich Berner also kept pursuing his interests in late antiquity and medieval Europe, as well as in Indian religions. His insistence on reading texts in their original languages led him to offer regular reading courses in which students discussed relevant texts in Latin and Greek. In addition, Sanskrit and Hebrew were taught at his department by his wife, Michaela

Berner (who, being a language genius, also speaks Arabic fluently). Importantly, every semester he also ran a colloquium on method and theory in the study of religion, in which advanced and doctoral students discussed classical and current approaches in the study of religion and their applications to their own fields of interest. The colloquium proved invaluable as a theoretical laboratory and methodological breeding ground for most scholars and students who took part in it over more than two decades.

Whoever got to know Ulrich Berner quickly realized that his thirst for new and interesting questions, sources, and theories was virtually unquenchable. Besides the fields mentioned above, he discovered fascinating material in places where scholars of religion seldom stray. Being an accomplished flutist, a connoisseur of classical music, and a lover of modern art, he studied opera librettos, composers' biographies, and the work of modern painters from a religious studies point of view. As the son of a forester, he had a deep interest in analyzing religious conceptions of, and controversies about, nature, animals, and the environment. And he worked on multiple other topics that ranged from the reception history of ancient mythology to mission history, from the task and the subject of religious studies to analytic philosophy of religion, from the concept of monotheism to that of skepticism and atheism, from the controversial notion of religious tolerance to that of interreligious dialogue, and from large-scale models of religious globalization to the specifics of South African prison gangs.

Even more remarkable than the general interest in all such topics is the fact that Ulrich Berner has discussed them all in scholarly writing. Many publications, mostly journal articles and contributions in edited volumes, along with monographs and edited books, constitute an impressive oeuvre that is as broad as it is deep. A current but still incomplete list of publications is attached below. While the areas and the themes are numerous, a certain thread runs through many, if not most, of his publications. It is a particular approach to religion which he never laid out in greater theoretical detail, but which has a powerful presence in his analysis of the material. It is a way of studying religion that takes the plurality of voices in each religious context seriously. Refusing to accept the superiority of narratives that are constructed by victorious, privileged factions of religious communities, this approach insists that scholars of religion must include in their analyses the existing alternative views, opinions, and conceptions in any given moment in history. Following this approach means bringing to light numerous religious beliefs and practices that were neglected by previous scholarship, and exposing discourses, conflicts, and power relations in any particular context. It forces scholars to study religion as an ever-contested and dynamic process rather than a static institution, as it is normally conceptualized by dominant religious elites. As he has shown, this approach can also be applied to the academic study of religion itself, both past and present. The approach is most comprehensively reflected in his 2020 book, *Religionswissenschaft (historisch orientiert)*, which, characteristically, comprises numerous case studies.

The fact that Ulrich Berner's academic oeuvre is hard to summarize is a testament to the wide range of his scholarly interests. It is also a reflection of his character. He hated the spotlight

and felt uncomfortable in any situation that required acts of representation and self-promotion rather than intellectual exchange. He did not strategically plan out his scholarly trajectory, so that he would be “known for” a particular topic or theory. If at all, his name has been associated with his model of syncretism and his thoughtful work on Mircea Eliade, but these constituted just two among his many interests.

He was deeply modest in character, respectful and caring, and he despised vanity, regularly feeling taken aback by colleagues in the field who touted their own importance or – worse – their professorial status and powerful role in academic organizations. For him, the problem was not the positions of power as such (he was a full professor himself), but that some use their power to bolster their own egos rather than to help younger and disenfranchised scholars. This is what Ulrich Berner did, quietly but most effectively. Thanks to his continual initiative, dozens of Ph.D. students, postdoctoral researchers, and colleagues, mostly from less privileged countries, especially in Africa, were able to carry out research in Bayreuth and build a career. Many of them then secured academic positions all over the world – and continued their scholarly conversations with him until the end.

Aside from grant applications, he supported younger scholars in seemingly small yet significant ways. In 1995, when I was an aspiring Ph.D. student and assistant instructor at his department, he could not attend the DVRW (then DVRG) conference and recommended to the organizers that I take his place – in a prominent time slot in the general assembly. Being my first public talk in an academic setting, this gave me great confidence in continuing the journey. Gestures like these he would make frequently. For example, he often suggested to conference organizers that he would forgo his honorarium for a talk if the funds could be used for travel support of younger or less fortunate scholars. He always cared about the financial security of his protégés and had the greatest respect for scholars who were content with a modest, secure position on which they could do excellent research – and pitied those who turned bitter as their ambitions to become a prominent professor did not bear fruit.

It was always about scholarship with him, about raising interesting questions. He would discuss your work with you for hours, and it is certainly appropriate to say, from the outside, that he was “generous” with his time. But he never viewed it as a sacrifice. On the contrary, he profoundly enjoyed having academic conversations, more than almost anything else. That is why he continued to find ways to teach students long after his retirement, either in co-taught seminars at Bayreuth University or in other places, most recently as a visiting professor in Prague. The students noticed his profound passion and enjoyed discussions that were more about deep analysis than the accumulation of facts.

Ulrich Berner was a dyed-in-the-wool scholar, and, more precisely and most explicitly, a scholar of religion (*Religionswissenschaftler*). Even though he also published in theological venues and urged theologians to take note of work in religious studies, his own approach was emphatically and invariably non-religious. For him, *Religionswissenschaft* was a historical, empirical, and comparative discipline, and he would sniff out hidden religious or theological

agendas from a distance. His questions were always religious studies questions, and it was all about the questions. The material base could vary. That is why he was able to converse with scholars in so many different areas of expertise. With his sharp analytical mind, he would bring up seemingly simple points and perspectives that challenged assumptions or could strike nerves that the conversation partner had not even been aware of. His comments always made you think – and often caused you to quietly rearrange your entire argument later.

Many of his own questions reflected his deep concern about injustice and hypocrisy in religious contexts. While he studied and presented opposing religious viewpoints in a neutral manner, it is quite apparent who his favorites were: religious actors and authors who courageously stood up against more powerful players with sharp arguments, but whose religious positions would not prevail in the respective historical context. Tirelessly reading primary sources, he looked for those dissenting, understudied voices and spotlighted them in his articles, voices that argued against violence, war, the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch trials, intolerance, the exploitation of nature, oppressive missionary activities, or, in recent years, racist ideology and religious justifications for the enslavement of human beings. His work, like his support for less privileged students and colleagues and their families, reflected his moral compass.

With his sharp mind, his compassion and generosity, his modesty, and his limitless curiosity, Ulrich Berner embodied a model of scholarship that his former students seek to emulate every day. His legacy lives on in his profound insights about the plurality of religious voices, in the marginalized historical figures he made relevant again in his publications, and in the countless lives he touched. He is survived by his wife, Michaela, and their children, Ludwig and Judith. He will be sorely missed.

List of Publications by Ulrich Berner

Books

- *Religionswissenschaft (historisch orientiert)*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2020, 456 S. (UTB 5297).
- Edited with Johannes Quack: *Religion und Kritik in der Moderne*, Religionen in der pluralen Welt: Religionswissenschaftliche Studien 9, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012.
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