

How colonialism created 'religion'

Introduction: Imagining and appropriating categories

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The foundations of the academic study of religions rested on a colonial pursuit characterised by the need to control resources, both human and economic. Out of this pursuit emerged the manipulations of the category 'religion' from beyond the colonial centre and onto its periphery, the 'frontier'. The use of the category 'religion' facilitated the European struggle with cultural pluralism that went with the increased exposure to so-called uncivilised and exotic societies which dotted the colonial map (Chidester 1996:2-3). Supporting the evidence of 'religions' on the frontier were presuppositions informed by Western conceptual frameworks which sought to create, to various degrees of success, a universal and transcendentalist concept of human ritualistic behaviour and faith systems. Presuppositions in themselves help shape the construction of any discipline, but with regard to the concept of 'religion', presuppositions have determined to a dramatic extent the very nature of its object of study and often at the brutal expense of social reality (Flood 1999:65).

The constellation of categories and ideas that emerged throughout the history of the study of religions tells us more about the fabric of Western culture and values during its time than about its intended object of study. For instance, the concept 'religion' is the product of historically and culturally-specific discursive processes of Western Christianity, and as Balagangadhara has noted, Christianity has generally served for Western scholars as the prototypical example of a religion, by effect standing as a fundamental yardstick for the study of 'other religions' (Balagangadhara 1993:307). Bearing in mind the dependence of the study of religions on such categories, one should therefore acknowledge that the discipline is founded on an analytical framework that is unmistakably Christian in its orientation.

Even with the historical origins of 'religion' laid bare, the category still retains its uncontested and "pre-theoretical" privilege that is often taken as "common sense" with the assumption that all cultures have some concept of a religion (Balagangadhara 1993:284-5). The category 'world religions' that is still in use today implies a clear-cut and universal concept of religion that is not only easily distinguishable but also assumed as a perennial feature of any culture in any time of history. To be categorised as a 'world religion', what are presumed and understood as religious ideas and practices need to be clearly identified as having fulfilled a certain checklist of characteristics, often oriented around principle features of Christianity such as sacred texts and proselytisation (Hirst and Zavos 2005:5). A limiting feature of the category 'world religion' is that it must be extracted from its regional and cultural enmeshments in order to be displayed in the supermarket of religions, almost as a consumer product. This inevitably means the narratives of tradition must be abstracted and distorted in the transference from a predominantly diachronic dimension (the notion of tradition) to a synchronic one (the notion of a religion spread out across the globe, almost outside of time) (Flood 1999:235).

In light of this academic and social reality, this essay will trace the historical development of the forms of knowledge that contributed to the category formation of religion, set against the backdrop of European colonial expansion in India. Then I shall discuss at length the implications

of colonial interventions in the study of religions on modern 'Hinduism', and some thoughts concerning the future of the discipline. Some of the questions that I seek to engage in this essay include: how much (or little) should the study of religions retain its categories and epistemic frameworks from its original point of reference, Western Christianity? To what extent does the use of religion as an analytical category help to sustain specific relations of power? What can scholars working within the discipline do to problematise their Eurocentric assumptions about religious and cultural systems in non-Western contexts? And finally, if the study of religions is a valid enterprise for the understanding of 'religion'.

Power, knowledge and Orientalism

The work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said form a pair of critical lenses on the instrumentalisation of power and knowledge in the construction of the study of religion from within the context of colonialisation. Foucault's work draws our attention to the power relations implicated in knowledge which renders all truth claims suspect. As a critic of the modern project of the European civilisation, Foucault calls into question taken-for-granted authoritative systems of power that govern and shape individual identities, or 'docile bodies' of knowledge (Ludden 1993:250). If disciplines are regimes of power, then the study of religions as a discipline is a "technique for assuring the ordering of multiplicities ... [used] as procedures of partitioning and verticality ... [Disciplines also] define hierarchical networks ... bring into play the power relations, not above but inside the very texture of the multiplicity" (Foucault 1977:218-20).

While Foucault suggested that the human sciences, as an organic machine of power, produced objectified bodies of knowledge, Edward Said on the other hand analysed the complex and subtle ways in which European subjectivity was sustained and reinforced at the expense of conquering, dominating, and objectifying a world of colonised "Others". In Said's critique of the colonial body of knowledge which he had termed Orientalism, he states that the fundamental hierarchical divide between the East and West that is pervasive in much of European interpretation of the 'Orient' mutually reinforced the motivations and justifications of colonial conquest (Said 2004:60-2). Orientalism also produced, according to Said, a venerated set of factualised statements about the Orient that became so widely accepted as true that it "determined the content of assumptions on which theory and inferences can be built" (Ludden 1993:251).

Upon conquering new territorial space, European settlers had also entered a new epistemological space that had to be under their command. Thus, local languages had to be learned to master new European territories. "Classical" languages such as Persian and Sanskrit as well as those in "vernacular" forms were understood to be the prerequisite form of knowledge, and as a result the first learning institutions on the colonial periphery were established to teach officials the local languages (Cohn 1996:4). Through mastery of local languages, colonial administrators were able to classify and categorise their subjects, issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order, and eventually new forms of knowledge that could further establish their position on the frontier (Cohn 1996:5). And through knowing the 'religion' of the Other, European settlers could not only understand the 'Oriental' with whom they came into contact, but provided a means of control.

Through the prism of Orientalist imaginings, religions in the 'Orient' were understood to be timeless and unchanging, standing outside the frame of historical, social, and cultural contexts in contrast to the Eurocentric conception of history, religion, and culture that is underpinned by the

firm belief in the progressive evolution of Western society (King 1999:91). What became apparent for anti-Orientalist, post-colonial theorists today is the mismatch between descriptions of certain Asian and African 'religions' and the lived realities of those who populate the 'Orient'. However, far from passive objects, those supposedly representing Oriental 'religions' constructed by colonial administrators, missionaries, and scholars, paradoxically, utilised and resisted Orientalist concepts in anti-imperialist projects. This is illustrative of the impact 'Hinduism' as an Orientalist construct on modern India and national identity.

The modern invention of 'Hinduism'

Today, 'Hinduism' has been taken axiomatically to denote a religion embraced by a majority of the Indian people in South Asia. Although used by the indigenous Indians themselves before European conquest, the term 'Hindu' did not connote a specific religiosity only until the nineteenth century due to Orientalist influences (Chatterjee 1992:147). As a Western explanatory construct, 'Hinduism' first grew out of the British legal taxonomy to describe and govern the religious Other in India who was not a Muslim, Christian, Parsee or a Jew (King 1999:99). Dividing (and by effect, constructing) identities along religious lines echoed the ecclesiastical approach in contemporary Britain regarding matters concerning marriage and divorce, property, and religious worship (ibid.).

In the systemisation of Indian identities under colonial order, Richard King has pointed to two significant ways that contributed to the notion of 'Hinduism' as a singular, homogenous religious entity: first, through locating the essence of the Indian faith in certain Sanskrit texts and secondly, by the tendency to define and compare Indian religion using contemporary Western understandings of Judaeo-Christian traditions as an epistemological yardstick. These two processes, interwoven and constituting each other, became the main features of the "Westernisation of Indian religion" (King 1999:101). Western presuppositions about 'religion' inspired by Protestant theology that placed great emphasis on the role of sacred text at the heart of its believers led the to the scholarly focus on certain Indian literary traditions in the belief that they held the key to understanding 'Hindu' people as a unified entity. Many of the early translators of Indian texts were European Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian writing, played a significant role in producing a homogenised and reductionist written canon through the Indian materials (Frykenberg 1991:40). As a result, the Indian religious traditions of the oral and 'popular' variety were either neglected or dismissed as a degradation of contemporary Hindu religion into superstition practices that did not reflect 'their' own texts.

Though the construction of modern 'Hinduism' was not a project conducted unilaterally by European scholars, missionaries, and colonial administrators, but a project in collaboration with certain elitist communities belonging particularly to the brahmin castes, hence the contemporary British tendency to emphasise texts representative of the upper caste as central to the Hindu faith. Such a collaboration helped established 'Hinduism' to the status 'world religion', as first presented famously by Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament in Chicago in 1893 (Frykenberg 1991:42). The resulting effect of the text-centred 'brahmanisation' of Indian religious life as a whole is an anti-historical understanding of an Indian religion that points to the pretensions of an 'essence' of 'Hindu' people. Such a notional and synchronic approach to conceptualising 'religion' is characteristic of Saidian Orientalist discourse that effectively,

whether inadvertently or consciously, dehumanise and manipulate the 'Oriental' (King 1999:104).

Implications of the Orientalist conceptions of 'Hinduism'

European colonial influences left an impact on Indian religions and culture that can still be felt to this day. According to Richard King, one of the most enduring images of Eastern 'religions' characterised by the contemporary Western imagination is on the one hand possesses the mysticism and spirituality unlike one perceived in modern Western culture, and on the other, the backward fundamentalist. These notional dichotomies constructed and propagated through European influence soon were taken up as ideological arsenal against colonial power: the claim that 'Hinduism' can be meaningfully referred to the religion of 'Hindu' people became to be supported by founding parents of modern India, Mohandas Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (King 1999:98).

The invention of 'Hinduism' as a rubric under which Hindus were defined experienced a curious turn of events in the hands of the Indian people. First, the notion of the text-based 'Hinduism' as the idealised and pure model of the Indian religion became adopted by different strands of Hindu revivalists, fundamentalists, and nationalists that sought to recover their place as the originals people of India with an antagonism imbued against Indian Muslims (Gold 1991:534). Convinced by the impression purported by European scholars of the "corruption" of the Hindu religion by superstition and therefore in need of reformation, various 'Hindu reform movements' began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Equipped with dubious writings on Indian religious history by British historians, the movements' commitment to restoring 'Hinduism' to its former glory was soon to become entangled with the rise of a nationalist self-awareness that was based on romantic notions of a precolonial India unified by that one faith, 'Hinduism' (King 1999:101).

Christian theologically-influenced presuppositions about the place of 'founders' of religions were adopted by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the Pan-Hindu Movement) that placed a great deal of importance on the historicity of figures such as Rama and Krishna as proof of Hinduism's genuineness (King 1999:40). While for Indians abroad, the unified 'Hinduism' was important as it could be explained by outsiders of the faith as a respectable religion, something that could be passed down to their children in religious education, and above all, form the basis for a sense of collective action (Van der Veer 1993:42-3). The Western influence on Indian religions is so prevalent that today what most Religion Education courses mean by 'Hinduism' is actually an Orientalistic and neo-Vedanticisation of Indian religion. Even after the end of official colonial rule in South Asia, religion became a key driving force in state-level conflict and acts of violent resistance. Deployed by political leaders to gain support, religion emerged as an obvious analytical category for which to interpret the politics of the Subcontinent, used by social scientists to examine election data and elucidate the crystallisation of the nations' political patterns (Hirst and Zavos 2005:4).

Reconceptualising a 'religion': 'Hinduism' today

Regardless of the suspect definitions that fill the category 'Hinduism', religious systems do have a presence in that they provide frameworks for certain rationalisations and actions in the daily lives for individuals, communities, and as a nation but keeping in mind that certain popular

ideas, beliefs, and practices between religious systems do not have clear-cut boundaries as they sometimes traverse across 'religious' categorical lines. As Harjot Oberoi had once pointed out:

[Scholars often] think, speak and write about Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, but they rarely pause to consider if such clear-cut categories actually found expression in the consciousness, actions and cultural performances of the human actors they describe (Oberoi 1994:1).

Thus, the categories used by scholars of religious studies often do not fit ethnographic data and risk marginalisation, even erasure: the meaning of certain acts and practices may be lost because they cannot be conceptualised to closely reflect 'authentic' voices and developments of certain faiths. Furthermore, the category 'religion' often underestimate the fluid and shifting boundaries across other identities. Identities based on caste (class), gender, ethnicity, geographical regions, and kinship constitute each other as does religion in informing communal and individual identities, beliefs, and practices (Hirst and Zavos 2005:6).

The study of religions in India in particular has moved on from being more than focusing on metaphysical / transcendental dimension towards the historical and empirical side of religion in which the study of religions of contemporary Indian society is more about how people construct their religious worlds (ibid.). The problematic term 'Hinduism', however, is useful so far as a cursory understanding of diverse Indian traditions at an introductory, superficial level. Further, the active engagement with the term by anti-imperialist movements has meant that 'Hinduism' had itself materialised in spite of Orientalism (King 1999:110).

Scholars today have wrestled with a more inclusive and non-essentialist understanding, far less a definitive one, of 'Hinduism' that captures the "ruptures and discontinuities, the criss-crossing patterns and 'family resemblances' that are usually subsumed by unreflective and essentialist usage" (ibid.). Some have suggested that 'Hinduism' be described as a 'polythetic-prototypical' concept, tremendously heterogeneous by character (polythetic) yet referred to as a kind of idealised construct (prototypical) by Westerners and Indians alike (Ferro-Luzzi 1991:192). While there is little consensus on the most appropriate use of 'Hinduism' as a signifier, there is little disagreement on the abandonment of essentialism and the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Indian religious phenomena as outlined by postcolonial critics of the study of religion. Bringing to light these issues can assist in overcoming the cultural and political elitism that perpetuate an idealised 'Hinduism' and potentially recover subaltern voices from the effacing and blanketing concept of 'Hinduism'.

Towards the decolonisation of the study of religions?

Unless we turn our gaze upon ourselves we cannot realise the reconstruction of the societies in which we live (Phillips 1973:xii)

The question now is, 'Whence do we go from here?'. It would be counterproductive to seek for a nostalgic return to pre-colonial cultural understanding of religion that aims to be representative of an authentic portrait of faith systems in the colonial periphery. As pointed out by Gayatri Spivak, there can be no return to a pure nativism following "the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project" (Spivak 1985:250). By locating an approach to religions that predates European colonial expansion would then lead to further constructions of itself in inverse relation to Orientalist construction of mythic proportions. The study of religions today still has a purpose to pursue so long as the 'object' of its study remains, in reality 'out there', a vital force in the world and thriving independently of the meanings constructed via colonial texts that once

claimed to represent it.

With regards to the colonial forms of knowledge imbricated within the discipline, categories such as 'religion' can still retain some value and validity insofar as its historicity and scholarly situatedness are acknowledged and negotiated in relation to its 'object' of study. Rather than a timeless, inert object, religions evolve with the times around the people who create its meaning and signs, adherents and non-adherent alike. As there is no pure, objective knowledge, the inquiry into religion cannot be neutral and value-free. All systems of knowledge are specific to certain epistemic traditions and embodied within particular cultural narratives, and therefore ethical neutrality should be recognised as impossible and undesirable (Flood 1999:220). Rather than the scholar assuming a detached position in relation to her object of study, meaning, knowledge, and 'truth' are generated in the interaction between the two. In other words, the observer is situated within the narrative of analysis as much as what is studied and related to as 'religion'. Moreover, such self-awareness of the observer's situatedness demands reflexivity and self-acknowledgement of ones' purpose of research (Flood 1999:167).

'Religion' has been demonstrated in the accounts above to be a contested category, even "alien" and "invalid" (Smith 1964:62). 'Religion' as a term that is both historically situated and deployed, and thus a single, indisputable definition of religion cannot simply be established by academic decree. A minimalist definition of religion based on supernatural agents might exclude Buddhism, whilst a maximalist approach as one developed by Ninian Smart, would be able to include secular worldviews such as humanism, Marxism, and nationalism. However, both approaches fail to take into account intercultural contact and conflict that comes into with the territory of religious studies (Chidester 1996:254). Because as terms that denote visceral human experiences and social identity, 'religion' as an analytical term does not belong solely to the academy, but is utilised and mobilised in political conflicts of "possession and dispossession, inclusion and exclusion, domination and resistance" (ibid.).

The question of whether or not the study of religions is by default invalidated because of its unfortunate links with certain forms of colonial knowledge lies in the issue of representation. Accepting that a representation of a religion is always likely to distort what is being represented can relieve scholars with a sense that representations are constantly open to critique and is continuously transformed to 'perfection'. As innovations in the study of religions, David Chidester has suggested upon the "open, multiple, or polythetic definition of religion" (ibid.). By a polythetic definition of religion, Chidester proposes its usefulness in the inquiry into the so-called "family resemblances" through which the identifiable aspects of religion form part of an open set of "discursive, practical, and social strategies of symbolic and material negotiation" (ibid.).

Does this spell end of comparativist method to the study of religion? The answer lies in whether comparisons between religions must insist on demonstrating similarities and continuity, rather than extending the method to compare differences. The similarities and differences are not inherent between religions but rather are produced through the practices of comparison and generalisation. That being said, the journey forwards in a post-colonial study of religions requires a similar journey backwards (Chidester 1996:256), beginning perhaps with working towards untangling certain Western Christian comparativist presuppositions rooted deep within the process of category formation discussed thus far.

This essay does not ring the death knell for the study of religions but a call for a shift in its

epistemic paradigms. The study of religions cannot be adequate as an adjunct of such disciplines as anthropology or Oriental Studies for example, because “religion has two ingredients: text and ritual that are often integrated” and thus the marriage of anthropology and philology is crucial (Flood 1999:223). By combining the analytical interests and methods of the two latter disciplines in the study of religions, anthropology can illuminate texts as textual studies can enrich anthropology (Freeman 1998:38-65). As discussed thus far, the inquiry into religions is an epistemic process that opens itself to a self-awareness of its assumptions and limitations that can, if need be, invite other theoretical frameworks developed in critical and feminist theory, reader-response criticism, and postcolonial criticism, some of which have consciously emancipatory agendas. Theories developed within these disciplines aim to challenge the legitimising forces in religion that are perceived as causing human suffering and suppressing social freedoms.

Finally, I take this opportunity to raise the issue of epistemological responsibility of historians and anthropologists of religions that appear to have all but emerged as a primary concern in the study of religions today. Self-interest, epistemic privilege, and institutional power differentials on a globalised level that reinforce problematic perceptions about ‘religion’ have gone largely uncontested in universities, school, and in political discourse. If anything, the lack of vocal and omnipresent reminders of the past helps the reification Western notions of ‘religion’. Helping students and societies at large become aware of history and sensitised to the variety of representations of spiritual traditions can break down monolithic views about the discrete, essentialist nature of human cultures that have been created in the laboratories of colonial political engineers. There is so much on the discursive level that scholars of religious studies can do, but this I believe should be the responsibility of inheritance that requires an inter-discursive dialogue across multiple levels to bring out a collective rethinking about ‘religion’ and its place in social reality.

Conclusion

The history of the study of religion is the dramatic story of the complex relationship between ‘Western’ concepts about the nature of religion and the often violent reality experienced by people and cultures all over the world under imperialist rule (Long 1986:3-4). Colonial influences that stubbornly remain in the way we understand ‘religion’ continue to shape the way we study and talk about human cultures and societies. The project of righting wrongs would be the running background theme in the study of non-Christian religions in particular, with “the anthropological gaze [directed] towards the otherness of Western culture in order to dislodge the privileged position of dominant Western cultures” (Turner 1991:104). The need to rethink the category ‘religion’ corresponds with the idea that analysing religious experience and practices cannot be mediated via pre-made templates, but involve categories and frameworks that are expandable and fluid that can, to the best of the observer’s skills and analytical delicacy, closely reflect meanings as conveyed by adherents, the living embodiment of religion. In other words, meanings in religious practices and beliefs cannot be in themselves have conclusive value. The study of religion still has relevance so long as ‘religions’ – certain kinds of culturally-constructed practices, values, and ideologies – all persist to have enduring presence in the late modern world, especially when aligned with nationalism and ethnicity, and will likely continue to do in the distant future.

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