

Book Reviews

Wrestling with Religion: Exposing a Taken-for-Granted Assumption in Mission

The Birth of Orientalism, by Urs App (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010)

A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason, by Guy G. Stroumsa (Harvard University Press, 2010)

Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam, by Dietrich Jung (Equinox, 2011)

Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History, by Andrew J. Nicholson (Columbia University Press, 2010)

Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia, by Thomas David DuBois (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

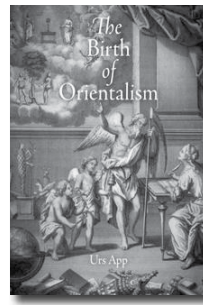
Secularism and Religion-Making, ed. Mark Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair (Oxford University Press, 2011)

God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World, by Stephen Prothero (HarperOne, 2010)

—reviewed by H. L. Richard

This article will survey seven new books from the broad field of religious studies. The discipline of religious studies is in turmoil, as present understandings have shattered the very paradigms that gave birth to the discipline. New paradigms have not yet developed, resulting in confusion and uncertainty related to every aspect of the study of religion. This chaotic situation should excite and empower biblical Christians, who have long fought the compartmentalization of biblical faith into a narrow paradigm of religion focused on private spirituality and Sunday morning events. The Bible is not a religious book, not a book dealing with a defined compartment of life, rather it speaks to every area of life with a holistic perspective on life under the lordship of Christ.

Five of the books discussed here are historical, wrestling with how our current paradigm of “world religions,” which is so inadequate, came to the place of acceptance it holds today. Two are focused on the early history of the concept of religion in the Western world. The next three probe aspects of the three great non-Christian religious traditions, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Finally, two broad studies are considered, one a collection of rather technical scholarly papers, the other a new popular introduction to the world religions.



Orientalism and Its Antecedents

Urs App in *The Birth of Orientalism* presents an in-depth study of key personalities, many of them missionaries, who laid the foundation for European thinking about the Orient and the religions of the East.¹ This is a book that has to be read to be believed, and this review can hardly begin to do justice to its fascinating contents, as suggestively indicated by App in his preface; “The history of religions demonstrates with sufficient clarity that invented facts, dubious claims, and mistaken assumptions can occasionally work wonders” (p. xv).

His first major study is of Voltaire (1694–1778) and particularly “Voltaire’s Veda” (the title of chapter one). Voltaire’s Veda is the infamous Ezour-Vedam, long considered a Jesuit hoax played out on unsuspecting Indians. App probes deeply and concludes otherwise.

Whatever the intentions of its [Jesuit] authors were, it was Voltaire who almost single-handedly transformed some missionary jottings from the South Indian boondocks into “the world’s oldest text,” the Royal Library’s “most precious document,” and (as a well-earned bonus for the promoter) into the Old Testament of his deism! (p. 64, quotations from Voltaire)

App picks up the Ezour-Vedam discussion again in chapter seven and spells out a convincing theory for the origin of that text and how it (wrongly) came to be associated with scandal. Yet this kind of detailed study of the study of ancient texts is presented for broader purposes than mere intellectual curiosity.

Voltaire’s “Indian” campaign ended up playing a crucial role in raising the kind of questions about origins and ancient religion that played at least as important a role in the establishment of state-supported, university-based Orientalism as did the much-touted colonialism and imperialism. (p. 64)

This type of undercurrent of resistance to Edward Said’s thesis regarding the imperial motivations of study of the East runs throughout, and is one of the merits of the study. (But note also trenchant criticism of a major critic of Said, p. 441f.)

Voltaire’s intellectual dishonesty is clearly documented, and the anti-Christian bias that drove his work is apparent. Yet this is far from the worst case of motivated ineptitude that App documents. John Holwell (1711–1798) is discussed in chapter six promoting a forged text as an ancient Indian document (a document that added fuel to Voltaire’s fire). In the course of the discussion App wanders into fascinating terrain, tracing viewpoints that the Ganges was one of the four rivers of Eden and the legend of Prester John, prompted by absurd claims Holwell made about idyllic life in Bisnapore (Bishnupur, 130 kilometers north of Kolkata).

Holwell's supposedly ancient text, the Chartah Bhade Shastah, was claimed as older and more authentic than the Vedas. In App's analysis, however:

Whoever authored the Shastah, it certainly addressed problems of utmost interest not to any ancient Indian author but rather to a certain eighteenth-century Englishman familiar with Indian religion as well as the theological controversies of his time. (p. 323)

Holwell was as biased against Christianity as Voltaire, and was hardly less scrupulous in his audacious claims, yet in the end App suggests that he was not himself the forger of his dishonest document. App chimes in on discussions about "Hinduism," particularly whether that is an invented reality, an imagined construct, or an appropriately designated phenomenon. He sides with "invention," with far more specific detail than most who would agree with that assessment.

Its inventor, I propose, is Mr. John Zephaniah Holwell, and the year of this invention is 1766 when Holwell wrote his second volume. This was indeed a creative act and not just a discovery of something that was there for all to see and understand. (p. 360)

Throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth century struggles with new "religion" constructs there was a presumed sense of historical development that led to wild speculations. Egypt was considered by some the birthplace of religion, with Buddhism and even Buddha himself being traced there (p. 180). Orthodox Christianity was divided on the idea that an ancient root of monotheism was evident in newly discovered traditions, with some early contextualizers (Ricci, de Nobili, etc.) supporting this while others saw only idolatry in and behind the newly discovered faiths (p. 279, etc.). The battle for Buddhism involved the wild suggestion that the Forty-Two Sections Sutra was a reliable historical text (p. 223ff.), and the idea traceable to Japanese Jesuits that Buddha on his deathbed taught an esoteric doctrine that undermined his popular teaching (pp. 2, 140f., etc.).

This is still only a few of the fascinating insights and curious ideas expounded in App's study. Yet it must be stressed again that his aim is not just to tickle intellectual curiosity. There is good reason for reticence in all "conclusions" and assured positions staked out by academics and practitioners still today.

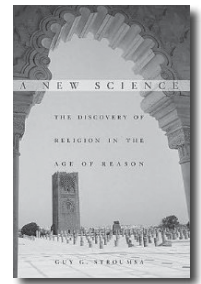
With regard to the discovery of Asian religions, parading "false" ideas (for example, about the founder of Buddhism) is far easier than understanding why those ideas arose and *realizing the fragility of present-day certitudes*. (p. 136; emphasis added)

Religion as a Now-Dated New Science

Guy Stroumsa goes still earlier to trace out the Western roots of the very idea of religion in *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*. He shows that the modern concept of religion developed considerably earlier than the

19th century when the comparative study of religion became an accepted academic discipline.²

Through a series of case studies, I shall try to show here that the birth of the modern study of religion reflects nothing less than an intellectual revolution. This revolution offered a new understanding of religion that had no real precedent in the Middle Ages or during the Renaissance. In this sense, the birth of the modern comparative history of religions can be called the *discovery* of religion. (p. 5; italics original)



Stroumsa, however, is not so focused on the discovery of religion as he is on the historical factors that prepared the way for this discovery. It should be noted from the outset also that he is not celebrating the new science of religion, rather he seeks to explain how the dominant paradigm which is now being contested in academia first came to prominence.

Stroumsa identifies three significant factors that laid the groundwork for the new theory of religion. The first is the explorations and discoveries of Roman Catholic missionaries in the Americas and later in Asia, where new peoples and practices were discovered that raised many questions about religion. Second is the Renaissance with its emphasis on antiquity and linguistics, leading to the learning of foreign languages and the translation of sacred texts of other faiths. Finally the Reformation and the wars of religion that followed raised many questions about religion and about Christianity itself.

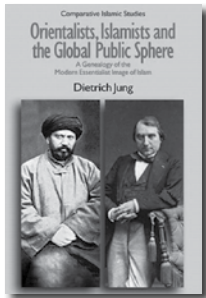
This text is full of insights. Stroumsa documents the impact of early missionary encounters with other peoples, and how the resultant recognition of multiple religions also led to the idea that there must be an essence of religion underlying this diversity. The idea of natural religion, which undermined a biblical perspective on revelation, came to the fore, as did a focus on ritual as opposed to belief (theological) systems. Biblical studies underlay the origin of religious studies, and Stroumsa explores trends in the study of Judaism, theories about the Noahic flood and the existence of idolatry, leading on to studies of Zoroastrianism and Islam.

In his penultimate chapter Stroumsa looks at civil religion as it was identified in China by Jesuit missionaries, and in ancient Rome. He outlines the Rites Controversy in China and documents that while Buddhists were considered idolaters, Confucianism was considered non-religious due to the absence of idolatry. Natural religion concepts led the Jesuits to see atheistic Confucians as very close to Christianity! The Church finally ruled against the Jesuit approach, but it impacted the developing concept of religion nonetheless.

In his epilogue Stroumsa summarizes the revolution that took place in European thought in the centuries under discussion.

The birth of the modern study of religion reflects nothing less than an intellectual revolution. This revolution offered a new understanding of religion.—Guy Stroumsa

The old conception of one true religion versus the multiplicity of false religions was gone. One learned to consider all religions—the ancient polytheistic systems as well as the newly discovered ones, such as that of India—as so many reflections of truth. (p. 163)



Islam in the Global Public Sphere

Dietrich Jung's study of *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere* brings the European discussion of religion forward to the present time with a specific focus on "a genealogy of the modern essentialist image of Islam" (the book's subtitle).³ Jung wrestles with a

profound problem for those who oppose present day certitudes about "world religions;" how did this inadequate and false construct come to such prominence and how does it still retain its hold on so many people? In Jung's own words:

The longer my engagement with the Middle East has lasted, the more I have asked myself why Islam is so frequently represented in the holistic terms of an all-encompassing socio-religious system. How is the persistence of this specific image of Islam to be explained *against all empirical evidence?* (p. 1, emphasis added)

While Jung is focused on Islam, his intellectual genealogy has clear implications for the development of the concepts of Hinduism and of Buddhism as a world religion.

This is a dense study that does not make for easy summation; the brief and selective summary here is intended to move those interested in the perspective presented to study the entire argument of the book. Since the book has only six chapters this review will follow the six point outline that is the structure of the book.

Chapter one defines the problem of the essentialist view of Islam. In both popular and academic discussions, in both the Islamic world and the West, Islam is seen as "a comprehensive, unique and unifying way of life encapsulated in the scripture of revealed texts and the example of the Prophet" (p. 5), strikingly in contrast to the pluralist culture of the West. Jung states that only a minority of scholars in the field of Islamic studies would support this essentialist paradigm, most affirming a constructivist position that complex social, cultural and historical factors contribute to the construction of political and religious systems.

The idea of a global public sphere is introduced, a new phenomenon in our world which is now a global village.

Ideas forged in European academic circles impact current Muslim self-perceptions in complex and intriguing ways. Jung closes his introductory chapter with a good summary of the twofold aim of his study.

Firstly, it is intended to enhance our understanding of the origin and evolution of a specific modern image of Islam. More precisely, it investigates the linkages between European scholarship on religion and Islam with the ideas of Islamic modernism in shaping the modern essentialist image of Islam on which Islamist ideologies and Western perceptions of Islam largely rely Secondly, in introducing and applying the analytical device of a global public sphere, this book is intended to contribute to the field of the sociology of knowledge in empirical and theoretical terms. (p. 16)

In his second chapter Jung discusses Orientalism and the towering influence of Edward Said. This is a perceptive chapter that merits serious study. Jung summarizes five Orientalist themes that Said identified, and sees these five still very much alive in the current essentialist view of Islam. Jung also summarizes five major areas where Said has been criticized, and discusses these as background for his own understanding of Orientalism.

Chapter three brings the global public sphere into focus, with analysis of globalization and discussion of "multiple modernities." The meaning of "religion" plays a crucial role here, and Jung argues that:

the revision of Protestant Christianity laid the foundations for a general notion of religion in modern society. This reconstruction of the Christian faith took place under the societal imperative of functional differentiation that was observed as the gradual separation of religion from other realms or social action such as politics, education or law. Classical theories of secularization rationalized this process as a "decline of religion" in modern society. More recent approaches to the sociology of religion, however, have emphasized the paradoxical character of this process. While religion has lost its all-encompassing character, the religious field has attained at the same time a much more visible and identifiable logic through its separation from the social environment. (p. 45)

Jung arrives at a working definition for "religion," but one which this reviewer finds very unsatisfying as it affirms "the holistic nature of religion...in permanent tension with the principle of functional differentiation" (p. 81). The near impossibility of an adequate definition of "religion" is well summarized.

Whereas the meaning of the term "religion" is apparently self-evident in public discourse, defining religion is a highly

Jung shows how this modern Western worldview and perception of Islam came to be internalized by Muslims themselves, against common sense and the reality of Muslim diversity across the globe.

contested field in the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, from a scholarly perspective, it is far from evident what should be understood as religious and religion. (p. 76)

Following the bias of this review, the wider discussions of chapter three will simply be skipped over. In chapter four Jung develops his core thesis that it was German liberal Protestantism that most influenced the modern understanding of religion, which spread from biblical studies to sociological studies to Islamic studies. This reviewer is convinced of Jung's interpretation, of which only a general summary can be stated here.

Ironically, the apologist attempts to make Christianity more rational [German liberal Protestantism] contributed, in the end, to pushing religion further into the transcendental realm of interaction with the supernatural. Modern religion ultimately was conceptualized as faith, as individually experienced belief in supernatural forces. In short, in the structural context of functional differentiation, religion emerged as a more autonomous and therewith clearly visible but at the same time much more limited social sphere whose outer-worldly orientation often has been equated with irrationality. In light of these reductionist tendencies of modernization, orientalist and sociologists have conceptualized Islam as a holistic unity trying to resist modern differentiation. In the modern image of Islam, this resistance is epitomized in presenting Islam as an inseparable unity of religion and politics, as an all-encompassing way of life. In light of the Protestant reconstruction of Christianity, western scholars turned Islamic traditions into an ideal type of traditional religion, fiercely opposing the rationalizing, individualizing and spiritualizing tendencies of the modern Christian program. (p. 155)

Ironies abound in the complex confusion of religious studies, and none greater perhaps than the need for Evangelical Christians to recognize that their fight against "the modern Christian program [liberal Protestantism]" of secularization and functional differentiation in the Western world has complex repercussions in the realm of comparative religion. Biblical Christians should be "fiercely opposing the rationalizing, individualizing and spiritualizing tendencies" of modernity, and in doing so align themselves with the supposed position of Islam (only with falsely essentialized Islam, not with the complexity of lived Islams in multiple cultural contexts; irony upon irony).

Jung goes on in his fifth chapter to discuss Islam as a problem, focusing on four founding fathers of the modern study of Islam: Ignaz Goldziher, Christiaan Hurgronje, C. H. Becker and Martin Hartmann. He identifies and discusses:

four core elements which in conceptual terms characterized the intellectual milieu in general out of which Islamic studies

emerged: an evolutionary approach to history, the paradigmatic dichotomy between tradition and modernity, a modern conception of religion, and the civilizing role of secular education. (p. 208)

From this foundation these German scholars saw Islam as a holistic, medieval, deterministic system of binding ethics and law, intrinsically different from the West. In popularized and trivialized form, these ideas contributed significantly to the modern essentialist view of Islam.

In his final chapter Jung shows how this modern Western worldview and perception of Islam came to be internalized by Muslims themselves, against common sense and the reality of Islamic diversity across the globe. Sayyid Qutb is first discussed, summarizing his project as "reconstructing true Islam with the help of modern conceptual tools" (p. 217). The Salafiyya movement and various of its leaders are indicted as "firmly anchored in the global discourse of modernity" (p. 248). An example of the type of transformation of traditional Islamic approaches into a modernized, fundamentalist mindset, can be given related to sharia.

They [Muslim reformers] initiated a fundamental change in meaning with regard to the most significant elements of Islamic traditions. This applies in particular to the societal role and understanding of the *sharia*. Originally representing a metaphor for "a mode of behavior that leads to salvation," the *sharia* developed into a "total intellectual discourse," representing a religious, scholarly and holistic field of social reflection and deliberation. Under the impact of nineteenth century Islamic reform and modern state formation, however, the meaning of the *sharia* was transformed into a rather fixed set of rules. This transformation took place with reference to the modern functional relationship between positive law and the state; a relationship that implied the idea of the enforcement of legal rules by the coercive means of the state. (p. 247)

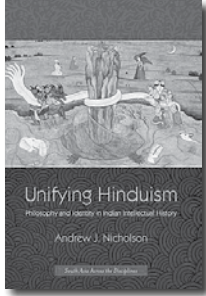
Jung offers no "solution" for the errors he uncovers in the complex aspects of historical development of understandings that he outlines. He succeeds in portraying how a fundamentally erroneous perception of an essentialized Islam came to dominate current perceptions, as:

Western and Muslim public spheres were, from the beginning, inseparable parts of a rising global modernity, constructing modern knowledge on Islam within the coordinates of a wider global public sphere.... They were all engaged in producing modern knowledge on Islam by interpreting Islamic traditions through modern concepts such as religion, culture, nation and civilization. (p. 263)

It can only be hoped that this inadequate summary of a profoundly important book will move some to read and

As is often noted, there is no mention in any Sanskrit text of the presence of Islam, yet Nicholson concludes that it was under the pressure of Islam that a unified sense of Hindu identity first developed.

reflect on the book in its entirety. Christian reactions against perceived-as-essential Islam need to be radically modified, and critiques of Muslim fundamentalism need to be refined in light of the roots of that debate in liberal Protestantism.



Hindu Unity

It is a long leap from the Eurocentric books reviewed thus far to this outstanding scholarly exploration into the roots of the concept of "Hinduism."

Andrew Nicholson establishes a new set of certitudes (still fragile, as App would remind us) with his analysis of *Unifying Hinduism*.⁴ He lays

out his central thesis in the opening paragraphs, which is a discomfort with both sides of the deep divide on "Hinduism." Both the eternal religion (*sanātana dharma*) idea that many Hindus enunciate, and the modern scholarly paradigm of Hinduism as a nineteenth century invention (or eighteenth, as App traced to Holwell) fall short of properly accounting for developments in the history of ideas in India.

The thesis of this book is that between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries CE, certain thinkers began to treat as a single whole the diverse philosophical teachings of the Upaniṣads, epics, Purānas, and the schools known retrospectively as the "six systems" (*ṣaḍdarśana*) of mainstream Hindu philosophy. The Indian and European thinkers in the nineteenth century who developed the term "Hinduism" under the pressure of the new explanatory category of "world religions" were influenced by these earlier philosophers and doxographers, primarily Vedāntins, who had their own reasons for arguing the unity of Indian philosophical traditions. (p. 2)

Nicholson makes this point mainly by a detailed study of the work of Vijñānābhikṣu. Vijñānābhikṣu was a *Bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference) *Vedānta* philosopher of the sixteenth century, and in re-evaluating the traditional academic appraisal of this largely unknown scholar Nicholson takes aim at the entire enterprise of the modern study of Indian philosophy. Only a few strands of his critique can be pursued here.

Despite the best efforts of historians of Indian philosophy, the terms used to translate Sanskrit philosophical concepts are imbued with Eurocentric (and Christian-centric) meanings. The two words most commonly used to translate *āstika/nāstika*, "orthodox" and "heterodox," come out of the Christian theological tradition and hence carry historical connotations that distort the understanding of native Indian categories of thought. (p. 176)

Nicholson documents that *nāstika* (heterodox) in its earliest uses meant a reviler of the Veda (p. 171). Later it came to be associated with denial of an afterlife (p. 173).

He suggests the best meaning for *āstika* (orthodox) is affirmer, potentially referring to the affirmation of either ritual, virtue, life after death or the Vedas (with *nāstika* meaning a denial of these). But "by the sixteenth century, the term *nāstika* had become a frozen category denoting the materialists, Buddhists and Jains" (p. 180), and this continues in standard texts to the present time. Vijñānābhikṣu was a crucial figure in the development of the idea that various philosophical schools were all part of a larger unity, yet his unity omitted the very school that modern Orientalists esteemed as supreme.

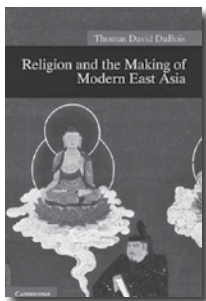
By Vijñānābhikṣu's account, Advaita is not a real form of Vedānta. Nor is it even an *āstika* system. According to Vijñānābhikṣu and the Padma Purāna, it is secretly a type of Buddhism, and in fact, its doctrines are even more awful than Buddhism's. (p. 98)

Nicholson objects to the "Advaita-centric histories of Vedānta that have become so influential" (p. 25), but, much more than this, objects to the entire schema of six orthodox schools of philosophy as a definition of unchanging opinions uniformly held for centuries. Nicholson shows how the six schools of philosophy became an "ordering principle" (p. 154), with most scholars being fully aware that many more than six schools of philosophy existed (Mādhava in the fourteenth century listed sixteen, p. 159). This fact becomes central to his striking final chapter.

There is a remarkable anomaly related to the times of Vijñānābhikṣu. As is often noted, there is no mention in any Sanskrit text of the presence of Islam, yet vernacular texts abound with clear recognition of that presence which was surely unmistakable. Nicholson sees a solution to this in the six schools of philosophy rubric, which made no allowance for bringing in the new phenomenon of Islam. Yet Vijñānābhikṣu argued against *nāstikas*, either tilting with windmills as Buddhists had long ceased to be a living presence, or attacking these traditional foes "as placeholders for Islam" (p. 191). So Nicholson concludes that it was under the pressure of Islam that a unified sense of Hindu identity first developed. And "the unification of Hinduism is a continuing process as different groups struggle to define a Hindu essence and to tame the unruly excess of beliefs and practices today grouped together as Hindu" (p. 204).

The colonial domination of the West over “the rest” in recent centuries has caused many Western categories, ideas and paradigms to appear more universal than they might otherwise have seemed.—Richard King

The development of “Hinduism” as a “world religion” goes on largely under the radar screen in the Western world, quite in contrast to developments related to essentialized Islam. Hindu traditions are sufficiently diverse to confound efforts at essentialization, and the modern rubric of “religion” founders most definitively in light of Hindu traditions. The practical import of these matters for missiology motivates this lengthy review, but such application must be left for other occasions.



Buddhism as East Asian Religion

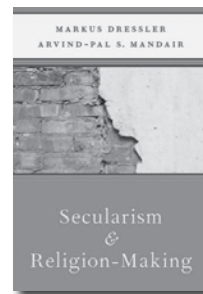
Thomas DuBois’ study of *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia* fails to reach the academic standard of the books discussed thus far.⁵ This is a rather popular level history of “religion” in East Asian history, and the biggest problem is that “religion” is

never adequately discussed. In a footnote to the introduction DuBois indicates that he is following Joachim Wach’s *Sociology of Religion* “even if this approach might not satisfy historians” (p. 6). He acknowledges that “the modern concept of religion is Western in origin” and points out that a word was coined in Japan to express this Western concept, and that word was then borrowed in China (p. 4).

DuBois introduces Chinese religion by saying that “for the great majority of Chinese people today, religion consists of a combination of three distinct traditions: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism” (p. 15). Confucianism is then defined as “less a religion than a political philosophy” (p. 15). Later it is suggested that “in practice, the three religions constitute a single whole,” with the further claim that “in terms of both belief and practice, China’s three traditions effectively combine to form one religion” (p. 35). Yet rather than define or even consistently speak about this supposed (and unnamed) one religion, DuBois in later chapters refers to “many Buddhisms” (p. 104) and reminds readers that “Buddhism consists of a number of competing schools and interests, rather than a single institution...” (p. 106). Later he says that “actual religious practice in China is very diverse. Beyond the integration of the ‘three religions,’ it includes dozens, or even hundreds, of local, highly specialized deities...” (p. 174).

In the midst of this conceptual confusion, DuBois outlines the intriguing history of what have been reified as the major religious traditions in China and Japan, and indeed the book

will be helpful for those who want such an introductory history. The story is brought right up to the current time with discussion of Buddhists borrowing Christian propagation techniques (p. 181) and mention of problems with the concept of “religion” at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions (“However well-intentioned the World Parliament may have been, the event showed how far the Western conception of religion was from the one developing in Japan” (p. 182)).



Religion-Making

The process of creating religions and the role of secularism in that process are the key themes in a collection of a dozen scholarly papers by eleven different authors on *Secularism and Religion-Making*.⁶ The editors, Dressler and Mandair, in their opening paper challenge the validity of the concept of “world religions,” and in that context twice define what is meant by “religion-making.”

We conceived of “religion-making” broadly as the way in which certain social phenomena are configured and reconfigured within the matrix of a world-religion(s) discourse. In other words, the notion refers to the reification and institutionalization of certain ideas, social formations, and practices as “religious” in the conventional Western meaning of the term, thereby subordinating them to a particular knowledge regime of religion and its political, cultural, philosophical, and historical interventions. (p. 3)

Broadly conceived the term religion-making refers to the ways in which religion(s) is conceptualized and institutionalized within the matrix of a globalized world-religions discourse in which ideas, social formations, and social/cultural practices are discursively reified as “religious” ones. (p. 21)

Secularism does not stand aloof of this process, but is implicated throughout as itself part and parcel of the religion-making process.

Despite their different attitudes towards liberal secularism, however, there is a consensus within the philosophically oriented schools of post secular thought that religion and secularity are co-emergent and codependent. Indeed, they argue that these processes haunt each other, such that religion, as it has developed in the West, has always been present in all secular phenomena even when it appears to be absent and secularity, in turn, has covertly continued a religious agenda. (p. 6)

The second paper in the collection by Richard King, “Imagining Religions in India,” presses the issue further into practical applications.

T*his review surely makes clear that missiologists need to grapple with the complexities of religion and move beyond simplistic assumptions about the “world religions.”*

The colonial domination of the West over “the rest” in recent centuries has caused many Western categories, ideas and paradigms to appear more universal and normative than they might otherwise have seemed. The category of “religion” is one such category and could be described as a key feature in the imaginative cartography of Western modernity. (p. 38)

As a number of scholars have pointed out, both our *modern* understanding of “religion” as a “system of beliefs and practices” and the academic field of religious studies are a product of the European Enlightenment. . . . As such its [the term “religion”] continued unreflective use cross-culturally, while opening up interesting debates and interactions over the past few centuries (and creating things called “interfaith dialogue” and “the world religions”), has also closed down avenues of exploration and other potential cultural and intellectual interactions. (p. 39; italics original)

In a summary statement of his viewpoint in this regard, King affirms what should be printed as a bold banner across all missiological consideration of “religion”:

The continued unreflective use of the category of “religion,” however, does not carry us forward in our attempt to understand better the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. (p. 43)

Both these opening essays ask the question of why religious studies should even continue when the fundamental category of “religion” has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. King gives a good justification.

The colonial translation of diverse civilizations through the prism of the category of “religion” remains, in a Western context at least, the primary point of orientation and intervention for the comparative study of cultures. It is where the suspects are held for interrogation. That there are considerable problems in reading universal history in terms of the deeply embedded category of religion in the modern Western imagination is precisely a reason for its ongoing interrogation by scholars with specialist knowledge of non-Western cultures, if only because it remains the point of entry of so much that constitutes “cultural difference” into the Western *imaginaire*. (pp. 53-4)

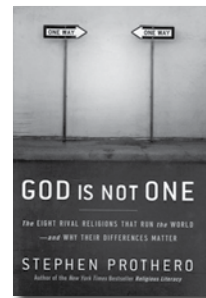
King also vents at the unfairness, if not illegitimacy, of secularism; “Secularist ideology requires the concept of religion precisely as a means of maintaining its own hegemony as ‘nonmetaphysical,’ which of course it is not” (p. 60).

These snippets from the opening papers do not do justice to their depth and importance, and this review can only briefly mention the subject matter of the ten remaining papers, each of which is worthy of more detailed treatment. Chapter three considers Sikh nationalism and the embrace of “religion” into related discourse. Chapter four looks at Islam related to secularism and the meaning of time and history. Chapter five

gives a profound analysis of “religious violence” in light of the dubious validity of the adjective “religious.” Chapter six looks at American “spirituality” in relation to “religion,” identifying blind spots in the liberal espousal of the former. Chapter seven is primarily an impressive critique of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, focusing on Islamic mysticism and whether it is supports liberal Islamic modernity.

Apache “religion” and its place in American law related to “religious” artifacts is the subject of chapter eight. Chapter nine looks at the Alevis of Turkey and their distinctive “religiosity” in relation to Sunni orthodoxy. Chapter ten documents and ruminates on the fascinating transformation of a north Indian blood sacrifice festival into a state-sponsored cultural event. Chapter eleven outlines the failure of a colonial attempt to use Buddhist institutions to develop education in Burma, and how the misunderstanding of “religious” aspects of the situation doomed the attempt. Chapter twelve concludes the volume with an analysis of tensions related to “religious otherness” in modern Germany.

These essays forward the understanding and application of new paradigms related to the traditional category of “religion” and are recommended reading for those seeking understanding of why the longstanding paradigm of “world religions” needs to be abandoned.



Populist Religion

Steven Prothero wrote a popular introduction (*God Is Not One*) to what he called in his subtitle “the eight rival religions that run the world.”⁷⁷ Prothero is to be commended for rejecting simplistic assumptions that all gods and religions are one, and also for seeking to forward understanding about different religious traditions. Yet in light of the serious wrestling with religion under discussion in this article, Prothero is disappointing and even irritating.

That there are eight world religions is the first point of contention. Sikhism and Jainism do not make Prothero’s list, and he elevates Yoruba religion to the status of a world faith. In a footnote during his discussion of Yoruba religion he defends the construct of world religions.

Like the term *religion*, *world religion* has taken on a life of its own outside academe, so killing it is not an option. All scholars can do is bend it, which I hope to do here by joining many scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion in arguing for the way of the orishas as one of the great religions. (p. 362, italics original)

But he acknowledges that “Yoruba religion varies widely across time and space ... and there are strong arguments for treating these adaptations as separate religions of their own” (p. 206). Later he refers to “the elusive and elastic manifestations of Yoruba religion” (p. 232), and admits that “[i]t is difficult to summarize the key practices of any religion, particularly one as elastic as orisha devotion” (p. 233).

Yet Prothero is not inconsistent in arguing for Yoruba religion despite an inability to define it; that same problem is present in all the “world religions.” Prothero points out that “religious studies scholars are quick to point out that there are many Buddhisms, not just one” (p. 12). “As the fatwa slinging shows, there are many interpretations of Islam” (p. 50). See below for the still greater complexity of other of Prothero’s “world religions.”

The closest Prothero comes to defining what he is talking about as religion is a disclaimer about putting too much emphasis on faith.

It is often a mistake to refer to a religion as a “faith,” or to its adherents as “believers.” As odd as this might sound, faith and belief don’t matter much in most religions.... When it comes to religion, we are more often what we do than what we think. (p. 69)

Prothero somehow concludes that Islam is “the greatest of the great religions” (p. 62). He presents an interesting picture of Christianity as the second greatest religion, with sections on Mormonism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and “Brown Christians.” Once beyond the Semitic faiths, however, Prothero has trouble with his undefined assumptions.

Confucianism seems, despite its relative obscurity in the West, to stand among the greatest of the great religions, behind only Islam and Christianity.... There is a nagging question, however, about whether Confucianism is a religion at all. Very few people in China think of it in these terms. For them Confucianism is a philosophy, ethic, or way of life. Only five religions are officially recognized by the Chinese government (Buddhism, Daoism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam), and Confucianism is not on the list.... Like Buddhism, Confucianism can’t seem to make up its mind about the religion thing. So it calls into question what we mean by religion and in the process helps us to see it in a new light. (p. 105)

Hinduism is considered “the way of devotion” (p. 131). Despite an acknowledgement that Hinduism is “the least dogmatic and the most diverse” of the great religions (p. 134), Prothero fails to adequately grapple with the vast diversities of Hindu traditions. The religion question arises again in discussion of both Buddhism and Daoism.

There is some question about whether Buddhism is a religion, but as with Confucianism this question reveals more about our own assumptions about religion than it does about Buddhism itself. (p. 186)

To be fair, Daoists have never really tried to systematize their thought.... Their tradition is an endlessly elusive grab bag of philosophical observations, moral guidelines, body exercises, medicinal theories, supernatural stories, funerary rites, and longevity techniques that, more than any of the other great religions, defies definition. (p. 284)

In the midst of this conceptual confusion Prothero suggests that

with the emergence of the Mahayana school, Buddhism moved undeniably into the family of religions, since its vast (and growing) pantheon of bodhisattvas and Buddhas offered devotees all the grace and magic of other religions’ gods (p. 190).

It can hardly be a surprise that by the end Prothero is ready to list atheism among the religions.

Whether atheism is a religion depends, of course, on what actual atheists believe and do. So the answer to this question will vary from person to person, and group to group. It will also depend on what we mean by religion. (p. 324)

Conclusion

This review of seven recent books on religion surely makes clear that missiologists need to grapple with the complexity of religion and move beyond simplistic assumptions about the “world religions.” The confusion evident in the discipline of religious studies must give pause to dogmatic assertions, but cannot lead to paralysis as this topic is too vital to be neglected or to be allowed to drift along under current inadequate paradigms.

Endnotes

¹ *The Birth of Orientalism*, Urs App, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 550 + xviii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

² *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Guy G. Stroumsa, Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 223 + x. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

³ *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam*, Dietrich Jung, Equinox, 2011, pp. 323 + viii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁴ *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Andrew J. Nicholson, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 266 + xii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁵ *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, Thomas David DuBois, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 259 + xii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁶ *Secularism and Religion-Making*, Mark Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair (eds), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 275 + x. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁷ *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*, Stephen Prothero, HarperOne, 2010, pp. 388 + ix. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.