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The spaces of religion: a view from South Asia*

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Anthropologists have spilt much ink deconstructing concepts inherited from the Enlightenment. Religion, possibly the most misleading such concept, has proved highly resistant to the acid of cross-cultural comparison. Debates about the nature of religion go back to sociocultural anthropology's beginnings as a discipline and beyond. Proposed definitions have been numerous, but none has come close to universal acceptance, mainly because conventional definitions are secularized versions of Abrahamic, and especially Protestant, positions and reproduce their essentialism and intellectualism. I argue that by looking closely at the way religious phenomena are conceptualized in South Asia, and especially at how distinct types of religion are practised in characteristically different spaces, a fresh take on the subject is possible. Religion as practised is not one thing but at least three distinct activities and should be conceptualized as such. But, if that is so, how and why is the totalizing conventional view still so pervasive and so powerful? Seeking the answer to that question takes us back to the constitution of modernity and the relationship of religion to the nation-state. The way forward is to contest the way in which religion has become the last bastion of pure essentialism.

Preliminaries

In social anthropology, as in many other disciplines, we face increasing calls from our students to decolonize our curriculum, by which is usually meant: put more works by non-White and non-Euro-American authors on the reading list. Anthropology *could* argue that it is been combating Eurocentrism from its very beginning, that this is and has always been its raison d'être. True though that might be, as a response it would miss the point. Anthropology cannot deal itself a 'get out of jail free' card to avoid all introspection and reflexivity; it needs to face the calls for more diverse voices, just as other disciplines must, as many anthropologists recognized quite some time ago (e.g. Gough 1968; Spencer 1997). In any case, if what we want is more theory from the South (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012; Menon 2022), what I offer here are some ideas from South *Asia*.

In interrogating what religion is, it surely makes sense to engage closely with the concepts that have been evolved in one of the most religiously fertile regions

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of the world. These concepts are to be found not just in classical texts and ideas from the region, but also in the daily practice of ordinary South Asians. This is to approach the question from the opposite direction to many anthropologists today, who work in the now flourishing subfield of the anthropology of Christianity (Aiello 2014). Janet Hoskins (2014: S311) has suggested that anthropologists and historians have succeeded in provincializing Europe but have not yet managed to 'provincialize Christianity'. What I am suggesting is that if, for a change, we described Christianity using concepts derived from Indic religious traditions, rather than the other way around, we might make some progress both in making the familiar strange and in constructing a truly comparative anthropology of religions.

As a way into the subject, let me start with two slightly easier examples: 'shaman' and 'taboo' are specific notions that did not come out of Euro-America, but from Siberia and the Pacific, respectively. They have evolved into cross-cultural concepts that may be deployed anywhere. Scholars, quite rightly, debate the definitions, go back to early sources, and question the applicability of the concept in particular contexts. So far as I know, no one has argued that there should be a complete moratorium on using 'shaman' outside of Siberia or 'taboo' outside the Pacific. However, anthropologists in the British tradition have been hesitant to use the term 'shaman' in Africa (Lewis 1986: 79), and others have expressed doubts about whether the concept is coherent in the way it is frequently used inside and outside the academy (Atkinson 1992).[1]

The same intellectual process of sifting and reflexive adaptation has not properly been done – or rather has been started but not completed – with the concept 'religion'. On the one hand, religion is assumed by many to be universal – it is just something that, in one form or another, all humans have, even when they claim to be anti-religious – but, on the other, it seems to take very different forms in different places. A small library could be formed of the books trying to pin down, without success or at least any widespread agreement, the definition of the phenomenon.[2]

The currently hegemonic understanding of the term 'religion' – hegemonic in the sense that it dominates in the legal and political regimes of truth and knowledge that animate nation-states and international law – derives from the Abrahamic traditions, specifically from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the past, to have a religion was to belong to one of these traditions; not to belong was to be a 'pagan', with a kind of pre-scriptural lesser form of religion. 'Proper religion' had a prophet-founder (or possibly a series of such prophets), a belief in an Almighty and jealous God, a scripture, a set of moral injunctions, sacred buildings and religious specialists, and a clear boundary, enacted and policed through ritual, between believers and non-believers.

Thanks to that very specific history and set of assumptions about what religion is, we are able to talk about religions as 'a faith', to think about religion as a set of *beliefs*, and to assume that religion is about belief in God or gods. Many of my colleagues, usually those whose own research is mainly to do with Euro-America, continue to do this, often relatively unreflexively. All of these are questionable assumptions when we start to approach the religions of Asia or other non-Abrahamic parts of the world. Thus far, the argument is, I believe, familiar and uncontroversial.

A proposal: three kinds of religion

My proposal is to dispose of the conventional concept of religion and replace it with, or break it down into, three distinct elements. This proposal derives, of course, from my training as a scholar of South Asia and builds on the work of many other South Asian

scholars.[3] My approach is not to try to define what religion *is*, but rather to see what it *does*, and to see how the different kinds of *doing religion* fit together (or not, as the case may be).[4]

I advance five propositions:

1. Religion is three things, not one; and these three things operate, as explained below, in characteristically different spaces and in characteristically different relationships to the human body.
2. Different 'needs' can be satisfied by different 'religions'.
3. Since the nineteenth century, reform movements have moved Asian religions closer to the Protestant model.
4. Modernization increases the gap between the public affiliations that are listed in the census and the everyday, mainly because public affiliations become mandatory in a way that they often were not before the modern nation-state became the universal norm.
5. In spite of this long history of reform and purification, most Asians still live in a polytropic universe.

'Polytropy' is a felicitous term, discussed further below, that was introduced by Carrithers (2000). It has caught on, because it describes a real phenomenon, namely the kind of Asian universe that presupposes many powers and dangers, all of which should be propitiated by the wise person, and which may require different specialists, the full range of whom should be employed if one can afford it.[5] In other words, the key concern is propitiation and polytheism; there is little or no interest in pursuing consistency across all spheres of life – rationalization in Weber's terms. Chaves (2010) called such rationalization the search for 'congruence'.

I label the three aspects or radically different ways of approaching religion as R1 (soteriology or salvation religion), R2 (social/communal religion), and R3 (instrumental religion). Starting from the bottom up, as it were, R3 or instrumental religion covers activities that posit supernatural beings (now sometimes called parahumans); humans' relations with them are mostly about avoiding or mitigating misfortune. R2 is a label for social or communal religion. It is about rituals and attitudes that focus on society, in short about belonging. In this perspective, the supernaturals are guarantors of, expressions of, or ways of talking about social arrangements. Finally, there are salvation religions, R1, which disregard or downgrade the supernaturals and focus on a transcendent god or principle. Each form of religion presupposes a very different stance towards supernaturals and towards ritual. Given that theories of religion usually focus on one or other of these different stances, it is not surprising that they often talk past each other.

A major recent work of sociological history or historical sociology that I believe to be entirely consistent with my approach is Alan Strathern's *Unearthly powers* (2019). Building on the ideas of many illustrious forebears (including Jaspers, Eisenstadt, Bellah, Taylor, and Assman), Strathern posits a fundamental difference between transcendent and immanent religious worldviews. Societies that have transcendent religion also have immanent religion, but not necessarily the other way around. Strathern assumes something like Karl Jaspers' Axial Age, the key period between 700 and 400 BCE when transcendence entered the world, discovered separately by the

Buddha and other Indian sages in South Asia, by Confucius, Lao-Tze, and others in China, by the Greek philosophers in the Mediterranean, and by Zoroaster in Persia.

Strathern's term 'transcendent religion' (2019: ch. 1) corresponds to my soteriology or R1.[6] Strathern is a historian, primarily concerned to explain sacred kingship and historical change; for his theory, the transcendent-immanent contrast is enough. For my purposes, as an ethnographer and anthropologist, I need to go further and distinguish, within the category of immanent religion, between the very different ends of R2, social religion or belonging, and R3, instrumental religion or misfortune. I think it is fair to say that Strathern's world of immanentist religion is equivalent to Carrithers' polytropic world; essentially, these are two different terminologies for talking about the same thing.

Anthropologists and humanities scholars have often responded to the discovery of conceptual difference by declaring that '*X* does not exist'. Anthropologists, famously, have done this with the concepts of kinship, 'primitive society', and many more. 'Religion' is not far behind. Many have followed Wilfred Cantwell Smith (2009 [1962]) in denying that there is a single thing, certainly not a natural kind, corresponding to the word (cf. Saler 2000 [1993]).

The claim that there is no such thing as religion is different, of course, from the claim that a specific culture or tradition had no word for 'religion'. Werblowsky and Wigoder inform us that 'The Hebrew language originally had no equivalent to *religion* … When a word for religion became necessary, a loan word derived from Persian, *dat*, came into use' (1997: v, emphasis in original). Thus, many have felt that the thing exists, even if it is not named. Smith was tempted by the idea that 'the rise of the concept "religion" is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself' (W.C. Smith 2009 [1962]: 19). Even where the word existed, as in ancient Rome, the meaning was quite different (in fact it meant something rather similar to, and just as polysemous as, the word *dharma* in South Asia). It was his survey of the changing meaning of the word over the centuries that led Smith to the conclusion that 'the word, and the concepts, should be dropped' (W.C. Smith 2009 [1962]: 50).

It is undoubtedly correct, especially in this field, that essentialism should be contested. Just as methodological nationalism has rightly been criticized in migration studies and sociology (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002), the same solecism, at a lower scale, could and should be called methodological ethnicism.[7] In the field of religious studies, the same error could be named methodological religionism. Indeed, methodological religionism might be said to be the driving impetus for the very creation of 'religious studies'. The way in which religious studies lines up different world religions and compares them has led to a series of root-and-branch critiques by authors such as Fitzgerald (2000), McCutcheon (2003; 2019), and Masuzawa (2005). They argue that religious studies is the product of a particular history, motivated by particular interests. Within anthropology, the same kind of deconstruction of 'religion' has been conducted by Asad (1993).[8]

There are good reasons to think that a proclivity towards essentialism is an adaptive evolutionary mechanism, as Astuti (2022), drawing on the work of psychologist Susan Gelman (2003), has argued. Psychological essentialism is necessary for learning language and acquiring concepts, as well as for interacting with the natural world. In Astuti's words, '[P]sychological essentialism is an evolved disposition and … essentializing is something that human minds spontaneously do' (2022: 198). However, as we know, and as children have to learn, even though sometimes useful, essentialism

can also often be deceptive. Deconstructing essences taken for granted by other people has kept many social science academics in business in recent decades.

The critique of religious studies by Masuzawa and others is still valid today; increasing numbers of religious studies scholars accept the force of it and are willing to allow that religion is not a universal natural kind. For example, Nesbitt recommends that religious studies teachers in schools should adopt an ethnographic approach precisely because it helps to avoid essentialism: 'An ethnographic approach to the teaching and study of religions reduces the risk of assuming religions to be bounded, static, internally homogeneous, depersonalized entities, and of presenting them in [a] reified and essentialized way' (2009: 980). It is the ethnographic approach that encourages scholars of religion to be alert to the ways that boundaries are crossed and categories are conflated in actual practice.

Asian lessons one and two

There are five key lessons that Asia can teach us about 'religion'. The first, as noted above, is that what we call 'religion' covers at least three different kinds of activity. Of course, the different kinds are often connected, and there may even be crossovers or unclear cases, but there are also many cultural contexts in which the three types are conceptualized as quite distinct from each other – and that is particularly likely to be so in Buddhist Asia.

By and large, the three types of activity are recognized as distinct by the people who are doing them. In South Asia, soteriology is usually called a 'path' or a 'way' (*panth*, *yana*, *marg*), and it is likened to a vehicle or a boat to cross the sea of ordinary existence. The word that Westerners most readily associate with religion in South Asia, *dharma*, can mean either soteriology or social religion today; my hunch is that in the distant past it was more readily associated with social religion. The term *kuldharma* or 'family *dharma*' encompasses everything included under social religion. To designate instrumental religion, there is a learned term, namely *kamya* rites, but no single vernacular or colloquial term, to the best of my knowledge (Gellner 1992: 136-9).

Independent confirmation of the vernacular salience of the distinction between the three kinds of religion comes from Gold's masterful and rich ethnographic account of the place of pilgrimage in village Hinduism (Gold 1988: 301). Local pilgrimages are judged by efficacy ('Do the deities deliver what is asked of them?'): that is, instrumental religion (R3). At the end of pilgrimages to the Ganges to submerge the bones of the ancestors, there is 'communal celebration evoking vitality and fertility': that is, social religion (R2). Finally, there is simple 'wandering', a third kind of pilgrimage, that takes humans 'to crossing places … where divine beneficence and even release … are more readily available': that is, soteriology (R1).

The three types of religion may be schematized as shown in Figure 1. A quick mnemonic for the three types is: Weber, Durkheim, Frazer, or, for alliteration, Salvation, Society, Spells.[9] Weber theorized and typologized about everything. But his supreme achievement was to produce world-historical comparisons of particular soteriologies' social and economic effects (or lack thereof). Durkheim was aware of soteriologies and of instrumental religion or magic, but, as a great reductionist, everything ended up going through the single sausage-grinder of 'Society'. In the inimitable words of Evans-Pritchard, 'It was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god' (1956: 313). Personally, I am not so sure. Detailed ethnographies of Newar collective life in Nepal by Levy (1990) and Toffin (1984; 2010) show how rich cosmologies, collectively enacted, offer a kind of salvation through social action by playing one's part

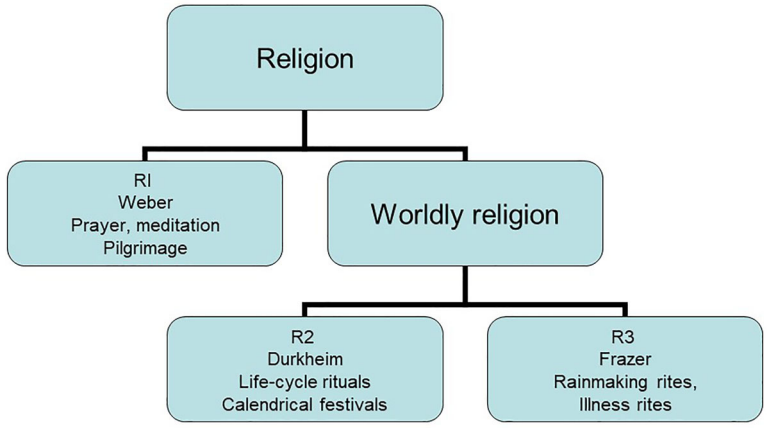

Figure 1. Three types of religion and their interrelation.

in the collective choreography of the city. Reflective participants are very conscious that society is doing the orchestration. One of the Bhaktapur interlocutors of Levy's student Parish (1994: 74-5), a Newar Brahmin, told him directly that society was a god.

The second lesson from Asia is that these different types or purposes do not have to be provided by one single ritual and/or ideological system – by one 'religion' in the conventional sense. The Japanese represent arguably the most extreme case of functional differentiation, with seven different contexts, in each of which a different religious system or combination of systems is responsible.[10] In Japan it is possible to identify four different levels of expressing and creating belonging – from the household up to the nation: these different forms of social religion (R2) are provided either by Buddhism or by Shintoism, or by both. Instrumental religion (R3) is provided by Buddhism, Shintoism, and Daoism in competition with each other – in other words, in a highly polytropic universe there is a free market for solutions to the problems of life. Salvation is provided overwhelmingly by Buddhism. The ethical code is provided mainly by Confucianism, which came to Japan under the umbrella of Buddhism.

As many observers of Japan have pointed out, most ordinary Japanese almost never stop to think, 'Is what I am doing Buddhist, Shinto, or something else?' The same applies to China, about which Chau writes, 'The biggest problem with … attempts at "mapping" religions in China is that it is modeled on a confessional-affiliational understanding of mutually exclusive religious membership. In an important sense the whole point of this … book is to argue against this kind of (mis)understanding' (2019: 11). Chau very helpfully distinguishes five 'modalities' of 'doing religion': discursive-scriptural, personal-cultivational, liturgical, immediate-practical, and relational. However, I am less comfortable with his wholesale dismissal of the affiliation categories (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, etc.). Rather, it would make more sense to say that making claims about numbers and affiliations has become a sixth modality of doing religion, one that is frequently intimately connected to issues of identity and politics. I return to this point below.

Over a century ago, Chau's key point about the irrelevance of the confessional model of religions in Asia was put brilliantly by the great French Sanskritist and historian Sylvain Lévi:

> As inheritors of Greek logic and Jewish monotheism, we instinctively apply the principle of contradiction to religious beliefs; for us, gods and worshippers are classified in closed sets, which we consider exclusive to the point of antagonism. Statisticians, proceeding in a laughably literal-minded manner, calculate the total number of Buddhists, Confucians, or Shintoists. An Indian (*Hindou*), a Chinaman, or a Japanese would be incapable of understanding them (1991 [1905]: vol. I, 317).

Another case of functional differentiation is provided by Tambiah's (1970) classic structuralist analysis of Buddhism in northeast Thailand. The argument is summed up in the diagram on p. 338. It shows how there are four different and contrasting ritual complexes for different purposes that make up local 'religion', and Tambiah plausibly treats them as contrasting aspects of a single, carefully structured whole. He stresses that this 'is not a conscious model on the part of the villagers' (Tambiah 1970: 339). Rather, as is usual in Theravada Buddhist countries, locals view the different parts as separate and opposed traditions. Each complex has its own specialists and its own language of ritual, though there are overlaps and mutual influences. Buddhism is dominant and supplies the overall framework of values. It teaches the path to salvation and some social religion takes place under its umbrella, but it is kept separate from instrumental religion most of the time. It provides powerful protection, but not specific remedies.

A parallel in the Islamic world would be Lambek's (1993) analyses of religious practices in Mayotte in terms of three distinct contexts and discourses: (1) Islam, (2) cosmology or worldly knowledge, and (3) spirit possession. Despite his emphatic disagreement with Tambiah on the question of the systems available to the 'foreign anthropologist with his or her sophisticated intellectual technology' (Lambek 1993: 379), Lambek's material could be subjected to a similar analysis. Just as in Thailand, the people of Mayotte do not see these different traditions as forming a single system. The difference is that in Lambek's case, their anthropologist agrees with them.

Lessons three and four from Asia: Protestantism and the widening census-practice gap

In societies less dominated by Buddhism than Thailand, such as Japan, China, and South Asia, the vast majority of people in the premodern period are not interested in classifying themselves as followers of one religion as opposed to another (religious specialists are another matter). That begins to change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both for internal reasons, to do with reform movements, and for external reasons, often to do with the politics of ethnicity, nationalism, and anticolonial struggle. A process of reconstruction begins that makes religions increasingly begin to resemble, at least outwardly, the modernist or Protestant model (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Van der Veer 1994). Anagarika Dharmapala, the great Sinhalese nationalist and Buddhist reformer, was particularly interested in pushing Sinhalese Buddhism in this direction (Kemper 2015).

One of the key characteristics of Theravada Buddhism is that monks are not priests (even though that English word is often used for them). Traditionally, Theravada remained probably the purest soteriology we know (with the possible exception of Jainism).[11] There was no wedding ceremony in Theravada Buddhism because marriage was thought to have nothing to do with Buddhism, which was concerned strictly with morality, the afterlife, and salvation. Weddings therefore were a non-religious matter.[12] (Mahayana Buddhism is different: at least among the Newars, a wedding ceremony

is part of the tradition.) With the spread of the broadly Abrahamic notion of what a religion is, there arose a felt need for a Theravada wedding ceremony, and one has duly been invented (Sakya 2000: 166-200). Likewise, Buddhist catechisms were invented by Colonel Olcott as well as a Buddhist flag, which has now caught on and is flown throughout the Buddhist world.[13]

My fourth lesson from Asia is that the process of modernization and nation-state formation leads to a widening gap between public labels and assertions of belonging, on the one side, and everyday 'practice' or what, following Billig (1995), one might call 'banal religion', on the other.[14] With the start of the decennial censuses at the beginning of the 1950s in Nepal, and the obligation to choose one and only one religious category of affiliation, as well as the consequent politicization of categories of identity, the tension between everyday practice and categorial belonging, which was very mild or non-existent before 1950, gradually increased. From 1990 onwards, with the activists of several groups in Nepal (principally Gurungs, Magars, and Tharus) trying to redefine their group as Buddhists rather than Hindus, the gap between political claims, on the one side, and actual daily practice, on the other, became, in some circles, quite obvious.[15] It would be wrong, however, to imagine such tensions as very severe or widespread in the country as a whole.

The leaders of the Magars were particularly unified and effective in this regard. They decided that, for political reasons, they wished Magars to be returned in the census as Buddhist, because they did not want to support Brahmin hegemony, and they therefore needed to get out from under the umbrella of Hinduism and to give up their use of Brahmin priests. In fact, the history of the Magars over the last two to three hundred years before this decision had been one of deep Hinduization. Magar activists seek to remodel Magar religious practice, especially life-cycle rituals for which they used to call a Brahmin priest, in a Buddhist direction by training lay Magar officiants and providing them with liturgical handbooks derived from contemporary Theravada Buddhist practice. A similar movement is also occurring among the Tharus, a tribal group in the Tarai plains bordering India.[16]

Research on religion among the Nepali diaspora in the United Kingdom also supports the idea of a cleavage between formal religious affiliation and daily practice (Gellner & Hausner 2018; 2019; Hausner & Gellner 2012).[17] Although they are based in the diaspora, there is every reason to believe that findings about the home shrines of Nepalis in the UK would apply just as much to migrants in Kathmandu or other cities of Nepal. When interviewing Magars or Gurungs in the UK, the man of the house would often state, 'We are Buddhist'. Later, when photographing (with permission) the household shrine (sometimes just a corner shelf, occasionally occupying a whole room), it would contain many Hindu gods. In itself, that is not a sign of contradiction: it is perfectly possible, and not contradictory, for Buddhists to worship Hindu gods. However, the considerable gap between, on the one hand, census identification, influenced by the politics of ethnicity, and, on the other hand, daily religious practice was evidence of the gendered division of labour, with the former sphere being overwhelming male and the latter overwhelming female.

Lesson five: polytropy continues in practice

Despite all the pressures and the purifications, which have been going on for a long time (since the nineteenth century and with increasing intensity throughout the twentieth),

most Asians still live in a very polytropic universe (Carrithers 2000; Gellner 2005). Their key symbols are often multivalent. Carrithers defines polytropy as a name for the 'eclecticism and fluidity of South Asian religious life … [which is] thoroughly social … [T]he consumers of religion actively turn to persons … such as gods and goddesses, or living divine persons … or even living persons such as priests or mediums … [P]olytropy covers many qualities of religious relationship' (2000: 834-7). These relations are hierarchical and expressed through worship; and they are often dynamic, practical, and interactive.

An example from Nepal would be the god known most widely as Matsyendranath, the name of a Hindu sage, a Nathpanthi yogi. But the god's inner identity is actually Karunamaya-Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism. And beneath that is 'Bungadyo', the god of the village of Bungamati, who brings the monsoon rains on which local farmers depend (Locke 1980). A parallel example from Sri Lanka would be Kataragama, a god who is worshipped by Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims alike (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: chap. 5).

Since I have approached religion primarily as something that is *done,* rather than as a set of beliefs, it should come as no surprise that ritual, too, has to be disaggregated into the same three different types. Humphrey and Laidlaw's book *The archetypal actions of ritual* (1994) made many important and useful points about ritual and how it works. However, it failed to engage with the indigenous South Asian tradition of ritual exegesis and, crucially, it failed to recognize that the archetype on which their theory is based – individual Jain *puja* – is just one part of a complex field, one type of ritual in a universe that encompasses many kinds of ritual carried out with very different intentions. They could make their argument about the role of intention in ritual – that ritual is a kind of action disconnected from intention in the everyday sense – because they focused on one type (ritual that is expressive, soteriological, and individual). They ignored much of social religion (R2) and the entirety of instrumental religion (R3), as well as the whole history of struggle and debate between different South Asian modes of religiosity, in which the renouncer religions such as Buddhism and Jainism defined themselves through and in terms of their rejection both of Brahmanical theories of ritual and simultaneously of the transactional assumptions of most of instrumental religiosity. Interestingly, though Humphrey and Laidlaw's is a very different kind of theory, it shares an individualist bias with Charles Taylor's approach in *A secular age* (2007; a book with which otherwise, as a philosophical reworking of a highly Weberian position, I have a lot of sympathy). That individualist bias comes from approaching their subject matter – ritual in one case, the place of religion in everyday life in the other – from their unconscious prioritization of soteriology over all other manifestations of the religious field.

Spatial representations of the three types of religion

Schematically, it is possible to distinguish the three types spatially, on two and then three dimensions. In the first case, we can differentiate the types by whether the point is thisworldly or otherworldly, and then by diffuse versus specific aims (see Fig. 2). R1, soteriology, may aim either at a very specific otherworldly end or at vaguer and more diffuse wellbeing in an otherworldly sense. R3, by contrast, aims at *specific* and *worldly* benefits. In so far as social religion, R2, aims at benefits, it targets diffuse worldly benefits (social solidarity, generalized well-being). To the two dimensions of Figure 2, we can add a third dimension, group vs individual (Fig. 3). Social religion (R2) is

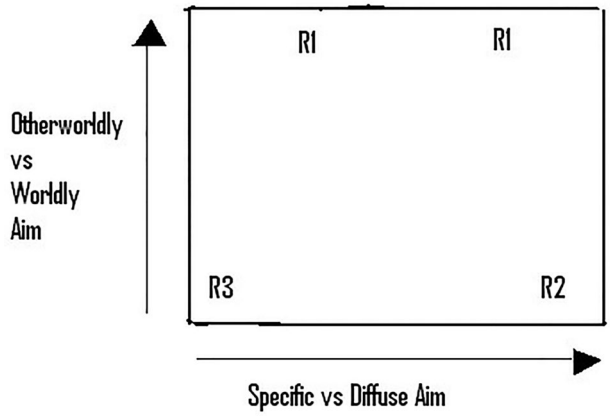

Figure 2. Two-dimensional spatial representation of the three types of religion.

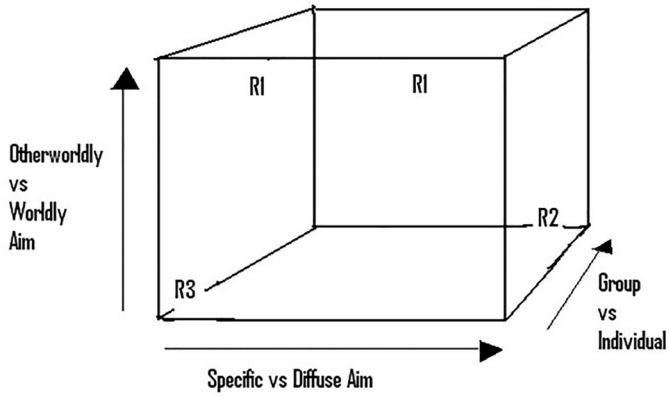

Figure 3. Three-dimensional spatial representation of the three types of religion.

classically and stereotypically collective, whereas instrumental religion (R3) is much more individualistic. So R2 and R3 end up at opposite corners of the 'ground floor', the thisworldly base, of the cube. Soteriology (R1) floats around in the otherworldly atmosphere, mainly towards the front, or more individualistic side, of the cube.

These are, of course, ideal types, effectively a model, to use a very old-fashioned term. In reality, there are plenty of hybrids. Soteriological movements, of which South Asia has many – so many that some scholars have doubted that 'Hinduism' is a coherent category – arise *in opposition to* existing practices of social and instrumental religion; thus, they often define themselves, as I have said, by that opposition.[18]

Once established, and having a specified set of followers, salvific doctrines are a very powerful means of generating social solidarity. There are numerous examples of soteriological doctrines becoming the key marker of ethnic or national identity. As Dumont argued, classic renouncer movements of South Asia, initially focused on salvation, end up as the defining social identity of a caste or group of castes, so that soteriology is routinized into social religion (Dumont 1980 [1966]: appendix D). This means that classic social rituals, such as rites of the life cycle, are frequently cast in a

soteriological idiom or narrative: for example, Thai men spending time as a monk in order to be considered fully adult. Similarly, the commemoration of soteriologically significant events quickly becomes appropriated for Durkheimian or R2 ends. On a darker tone, the identification of particular minority communities with specific soteriological doctrines not shared by the majority sharpens the boundary between the out-group and the majority, with the tragic consequences that we see in many places throughout the world.

There are significant spatial and social implications of these different types. Instrumental rituals (R3) are characteristically carried on in private, usually within the home, either of the patient/sponsor or of the healer/shaman. There may be occasional rain-making rituals carried on collectively and in public, but they are rare. Social rituals, by contrast, are often carried on in public. Even when taking place within a household, there is often a public aspect (e.g. a procession around the locality) as part of the ritual. Life-cycle rituals are performed not only in order to bring about a change of status, but also to proclaim that status. Festivals and communal rites (R2) a fortiori take place in public and in designated space, either sacred buildings or space that is sanctified for the occasion.

Soteriological rituals (R1) are both public and private. Sometimes, they are the private act of the individual, observed by no one, and supposed to be observed by no one (e.g. prayer or meditation). At other times, they are collective and public, as in a Catholic mass or Buddhist alms-round, or in listening to a sermon by a Jain teacher. Seekers on the path may share their efforts, and very often do, and in that case they take place in spaces that are publicly designated as sacred and designed for such soteriological purposes. However, despite all the brotherhood or sisterhood on the soteriological path, salvation remains, in the last resort, an overwhelmingly individual project. Furthermore, soteriology is powerfully connected to marginal or liminal spaces. It is in those spaces that the seeker finds the insight and/or the power to provide a critique of the world and to offer a path out of it.

Mindful of Knott's (2005) argument that we must place the body at the centre of the study of space, I suggest that the three orientations have characteristically different stances on the body. Instrumental rituals seek to heal or benefit the *physical* body. Social rituals aim to transform the *social* body (as in life-cycle rituals), to unite it with others (as in festivals), or to benefit it generally (but not specifically, as instrumental rituals do). Finally, soteriological ritual seeks to *transcend* the body, or at least – as in Daoism – to transcend the normal understanding of the body by revealing its hidden meanings and potentials.[19]

As a specialist on South Asia, it is incumbent on me to observe that the three orientations form a hierarchy, one that would be recognized by most South Asians. Where all three types exist, even when they are not provided by the same 'system', soteriology is clearly given the highest value, even if, as noted, it is often routinized or enmeshed in immanent concerns. As such, soteriology encompasses (in the specifically Dumontian sense) the worldly orientations of the other spheres, even though it may appear to be a minority pursuit honoured most often in the breach. It is also important to note that these are not static categories. If we accept that there is some kernel of truth in the Axial Age idea, it is clear that soteriology is a later development and indeed is developed in conscious reaction to existing forms of social and instrumental religion. Whether instrumental religion (R3) is the original form of religion, as Frazer thought, or social religion (R2), as Durkheim argued, need not detain us here.

What are the consequences of ignoring these contrasting types and the dynamic historical relationship between them? To take one example of a currently popular approach, Atran and Norenzeyan (2004) assert that all religions believe in metahuman or supramundane powers, both benevolent and malevolent, and all societies endorse, through ritual, counterintuitive beliefs about them. What these generalizing views omit is the idea that transcendent traditions *reject* conventional views of spirits and spread countervailing attitudes and approaches to them, including the views that spirits don't exist, or that if they do exist, that they don't matter. Confucianism contains the view that rituals have to be conducted, even though the spirits to which they are directed don't exist or don't matter. A similar attitude was common among members of the elite of the ancient Mediterranean world. It is surely likely that different cognitive mechanisms are at work, both in the transmission/memory of tradition and in interactions with parahuman entities, depending on which of the three spheres we are talking about. Only by distinguishing these three types of religion are cognitivists likely to come up with a comprehensive theory.[20]

Whence the strength of methodological religionism?

If the analysis so far is even partially correct, why has the erroneous monistic view been so powerful? Why, in so many places, has the jealous Abrahamic God idea managed to push out what one might call humans' natural polytropic tendencies, what Strathern (2019) would call the pervasive immanentist form of religion, or what Chaves (2010) posits as the natural condition of 'non-congruence' of most people in their everyday lives? This is a huge question, so only a brief and broad-brush answer can be attempted here.

In the first place, it is, I believe, an ethnographic fact that religion is one of the last bastions of essentialism, including in the UK (gender would be another). As evidence, I advance the categories of the 2011 UK census. In the question on ethnicity, over the decades the number of mixed-identity options has multiplied. Even though one may only tick one box, at least multiple identities are recognized. In the question on nationality, by contrast, respondents are positively encouraged to tick more than one box (e.g. the state wants people to identity both as Scottish and as British). But, in the question on religion, one and only one box may be ticked and no multiple identities are on offer. Even though the Office for National Statistics recognizes that essentialism is wrong in the spheres of national or ethnic belonging, it remains wedded to it when the subject is religion.

To say this, however, is to re-describe the problem, and not to answer the question. A first approximation is to say that the Enlightenment thinkers, even though many were hostile either to all organized religion or to religion as such, still retained the same concept of religion as their opponents. A fuller answer requires us to go further back to the history of Christianity and Islam, and their contrast with Buddhism, as well as forward to the history of nationalism. The world has seen many soteriologies that seek to go beyond ordinary adjustments to the world. But only three such soteriologies have been hugely successful as missionary religions spreading over large areas and many different cultures: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Between them they claim more than half of the world's population today and far outstrip the adherents of any other named religion. All three stand in sharp contrast to the inherited 'pagan' background religions of their time. All three require a rejection or reworking or transvaluation of values on the part of those who convert.

Buddhism is different from the other two in not sharing the jealous Abrahamic God. Buddhism also incorporates a hierarchical vision, in the sense that, while it stands for the equality of opportunity of all human beings, it does not posit an equality of respect for everyone at any given moment.[21] This may sound harsh, but in Buddhism gifts given to the spiritually advanced are far more meritorious than gifts given to beggars (Strenski 1983). In the other two soteriologies, by contrast, all believers are spiritually equal in a significant sense, for all that huge hierarchies existed and still exist in practice (and for all that they, too, developed differentiated hierarchies of merit for donations). In short, only the Abrahamic religions have sought to obliterate the distinctions between the three types of religion (though in practice they have often had to compromise).

I have already indicated, very briefly, in my discussion of the Protestantization of Buddhism, how 'traditional' forms of Buddhism have been transformed by the impact of Western understandings of religion.[22] It is harder to make the same argument about Islam, because Muslims seem from the beginning to have applied an idea of religion to their own practice that was not very different from modern conceptions (Abbasi 2021; W.C. Smith 2009 [1962]: chap. 5). Nonetheless, it can hardly be denied that reformist systematizing tendencies within Islam have been hugely strengthened by the spread of literacy, Western forms of education, and so on.

I agree with Hastings (1997: 1) when he asserts that, considering the four concepts of religion, nation, ethnicity, and nationalism, it is impossible to write the full history of any one of the four without taking into account the other three. With that in mind, the following would seem to be some of the key elements of an explanation for the power of particular institutional forms to obliterate the distinctions between the three types of religion:

- The monopolistic tendencies of the Christian church, whether in relation to the supernatural (Thomas 1971) or landowning (Goody 1983), were encouraged by the Peace of Westphalia, which carved Europe up into zones of influence for different churches; not coincidentally, 1648 is seen as the key turning point for the creation of the modern nation-state as well.
- These tendencies built on the foundation of the jealous God of the Old Testament combined with the universalism of the New Testament (Dumont 1982).
- After the Reformation, the jealous universalizing God escaped the control of the Catholic Church, but remained an aspiration, even when reduced to the level of the individual (Gorski 2003; Weber 2001 [1905]).
- Many early forms of nationalism in Europe, which formed the model for the development of nationalism elsewhere (Anderson 1991: chap. 3), took the 'chosen people' of the Old Testament as their inspiration (Hastings 1997).
- Religious affiliation may not always be the determining factor in nationalism (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands), but in many cases it is pretty decisive; even where the state is formally secularist, there are powerful forces seeking to define national belonging in religious terms (Turkey, India).[23]

All these historical influences came together to create a post-Enlightenment common-sense view, written into law and the structures of people's lives, supporting the unitary religion assumption alongside the unitary nation assumption. On the one hand, a centralizing ideological package that combines all three kinds of religion, and excludes competitors, is extremely attractive both to rulers and to priests. On the

other hand, when the separation of state and religion has occurred and instituted a free market in religious offerings, a package deal is also attractive to religious entrepreneurs, who are then able to offer a complete and all-encompassing solution to the whole of life, as the example of the global success of Pentecostalism demonstrates. No wonder, then, that social and religious elites affiliated with traditional polytropic Asian religions feel threatened by the arrival of aggressively missionizing forms of Christianity and Islam that demolish the barriers between the three types of religion; no wonder that such elites enact anti-conversion laws.

The problem, looked at from another angle, is: what are or were the conditions of possibility of religious monopolization by one organization? As Boyer (2001: 315) has pointed out, all religious specialists attempt to turn themselves into a guild and to exclude the competition. But only a few guilds succeed. More common is the Chinese or South Asian polytropic situation in which a huge number of competing specialists jockey for position. It is striking that this was the case in China, even when China did have, as a clear ideal, and in periods as an actually existing reality, a unitary, centralized, and bureaucratically organized society, unlike other parts of Asia. By contrast, political fragmentation in Europe encouraged small pockets of religious and national homogeneity. Clearly, in some situations in Asia there was a greater degree of religious uniformity and control than in others, as, for example, in parts of Tibet, Burma, Thailand, and Japan in the Tokugawa period. However, in none of these situations, before the modern period, did religious hierarchies achieve anything like the hegemony of the Catholic Church in its heyday.

Conclusions

I have offered a theory of religion in that I have suggested what it is and what it is not, and how to use the concept in a way that is informed by practice, but still offers grounds for generalization and comparison.[24] I have offered a *spatial* theory that distinguishes the characteristic spaces, bodily attitudes, communal/individual orientations, and purposes of different types of religion. I have also suggested that these ideal types, or the model that they collectively constitute, should not be seen as static. Rather, the different elements of it are in a constant historical process of mutual self-definition and re-constitution.

I have gestured towards Max Weber's great insight, subsequently elaborated by others, that one specific approach to salvation had a deep elective affinity to the culture of early modernity, to the extent that it may legitimately be seen as one of the ultimate causes that helped to bring that modernity into existence (Gellner 2001: chap. 1). This world-historical importance of one particular absolutist form of salvation – which I have referred to as Protestantization – is a, or maybe the, major theme explaining the many ways in which the practical and ritual systems that we call 'religions' have been reconstituted in the last hundred and fifty years or so. I have indicated, thereby, why it might be that two particular variants of soteriology, Christianity and Islam, have come to dominate the world that we live in today.

I return, at the end, to the distinction between census affiliations and everyday practice. Census classifications are not just opposed to practice – though they do indeed oppose it and are in tension with it. The census, in the eyes of many activists and in the eyes of the state, also actively moulds and reforms the practice of the everyday. Categorization is itself a form of practice, one favoured by activists, particularly those religious specialists or virtuosos who seek to reconstruct their whole life in terms of

a single regulatory ideal. Ordinary life has a way of interrupting such rationalizations, however, as demonstrated in Schielke's (2015) subtle ethnography. In his account of a small town in northern Egypt, the perspective of repeated visits and long engagement enables Schielke to track the attempts of one of his young male friends to embody and live out the Salafi Muslim ideal. The young man embarks on heroic attempts to remake himself, to impose on himself an iron discipline every day, to avoid cigarettes and impious activities (and not just on himself: he tries to make his mother adopt the full-face *niqab*). In the end, all founders and dissipates. This does not cause the young man concerned to lose faith in the legitimacy of Salafism as such: 'He felt that he had found the correct, true Islam but had failed to live it out. He had been happy, but now he was troubled' (Schielke 2015: 131).

The demands of a jealous God and the appeals of a highly rationalized form of life lived according to the dictates of an all-encompassing framework that provides answers and rules for every circumstance – these evidently remain attractive ideals for many. However, the complexities and diversity of human purposes, the unpredictability of events, the multifarious demands of the everyday, all combine to mean that life always outruns the schemes designed to control it. In that sense, the baggy hierarchical wisdom of South Asian soteriology-assimilating polytropy may provide a more comfortable set of clothes for the exigencies of everyday life than the tight-fitting straitjacket of Abrahamic absolutism.[25] South Asian ways of dividing up 'religion' may also offer alternative conceptual handrails – 'theory from the South' – for those who seek to think their way out of the rigid inherited frameworks of modernity and the nation-state.

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NOTES

[Correction added on 1 June 2023, after first online publication: In the reference by Gellner, D., J. Pfaff-Czarnecka & J. Whelpton [2008], the year in brackets has been corrected from [1987] to [1997]. The reference "Hoskins, J. & J. Laidlaw" has been corrected to "Humphrey, C. & J. Laidlaw" in the reference list.]

[1] For a sceptical view on 'shamanism', see Rydving (2011).

[2] For a comprehensive survey, see Saler (2000 [1993]).

[3] I believe I first encountered the main concepts in lectures on South Asian religion by Richard Gombrich, my D.Phil. supervisor. See especially the exposition in Gombrich (1988: 19-23).

[4] Of all the proposed definitions, Southwold's (1978) polythetic solution (twelve characteristics, no one of which is present in every case) seems to me the best.

[5] I owe to Charles Stewart the point that *polutropos* is the famous epithet describing Odysseus in the opening lines of the *Odyssey*. It is usually translated as cunning or crafty, which are exactly the kind of flexible and pragmatic qualities needed to navigate a polytropic universe.

[6] For soteriology as 'doctrinal religion', see Whitehouse (2021).

[7] Without calling it that, the attack on essentialized ethnic categories is now commonplace within anthropology (Banks 1996; Barth 1969; Southall 1970).

[8] For another genealogy, see Nongbri (2013). See also J.Z. Smith (1998).

[9] I owe this suggestion to David Parkin.

[10] I believe I first heard this analysis being expounded by the anthropological sociologist Ronald Dore, in a taped lecture that I found in the library at Oxford Brookes many years ago. As far as I have been able to establish, he never published it in that form. Dore was clearly drawing on his detailed ethnographic research in

a Tokyo ward. Without listing them as I have, he distinguished the different contexts of practice (Dore 1958). My discussion of the Japanese case is in Gellner (2001: 331-3). On everyday Japanese religion, cf. Daniels (2009).

[11] See Gombrich (1995) on the Buddhist monk and priest (also Gellner 2001: chaps 4-5). On Jainism, see Banks (1992); Carrithers & Humphrey (1991); Dundas (1992); Laidlaw (1995).

[12] Cf. Evans-Pritchard's remark, which he surely knew to be controversial, that, in describing Nuer religion, he did not feel 'obliged to describe fully such ceremonies as those that take place at initiations, engagements, weddings, &c., which on no definition of religion can be regarded as religious phenomena' (1956: viii).

[13] On Olcott, see Prothero (1996). On Buddhist modernism, see Gombrich (1988); Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988); Kemper (2015).

[14] Bailey's (2009) idea of 'implicit religion' seems to go beyond this, perhaps to imply a kind of pantheism in which religion is found in everything, even the most secular or non-religious contexts.

[15] On ethnicity in Nepal, see, inter alia, Adhikari & Gellner (2016); Fisher (2001); Gellner (2007); Gellner, Hausner & Letizia (2016); Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka & Whelpton (2008 [1997]); Guneratne (2002); Hangen (2010); Lawoti (2005); Lawoti & Hangen (2013); Lecomte-Tilouine (2009); Shneiderman (2015); Toffin (2013: chap. 3).

[16] These movements have been described by Letizia (2014).

[17] On shrines, see Gellner, Hausner, Laksamba & Adhikari (2010).

[18] On the anthropology of Hinduism and the question of whether it is a coherent category, see Gellner (forthcoming). Anthropologists of Christianity have worried about 'Christianity's stubborn multiplicity' (Haynes 2014: S362); anthropologists of Hinduism have taken multiplicity for granted.

[19] Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) three bodies – the individual body-self, the social body, and the body politic – can be aligned with the three types, in that the first is the sphere of R1 and R3, and the others of R2.

[20] Reflective cognitivists are aware that it is necessary to break down (or 'fractionate') the categories (e.g. McKay & Whitehouse 2015; Whitehouse 2021), even if they do not do so in the way that I am recommending.

[21] '[T]he distinct means by which Indic and monotheistic traditions tackle the question of supernatural power must again be appreciated: monotheism seeks to eradicate all other forms of it; Buddhism to encompass and subordinate them' (Strathern 2019: 135).

[22] For a view sceptical of the centrality of Protestantism, see Hann (2014).

[23] 'A great deal of vague discussion about the relationship between religion and nationalism is blighted by the easy assumption that every religion is likely to have the same sort of political effect. It is not so' (Hastings 1997: 187).

[24] I hope it is evident that I am not urging the abandonment of the word and the concept altogether when talking about the premodern period, as Nongbri does (2013: 156f.).

[25] Clearly, these are ideal types. In practice, hierarchy must give a place to monistic tendencies and Abrahamic religions have to provide the space for heterogeneity. The huge spread of Neopaganism and other forms of New Age religion, both organized and unorganized, has to be read, among other things, as a rejection of the Abrahamic worldviews, and in particular of Protestant trends within them.

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Les espaces de la religion : une vision sud-asiatique

Résumé

La déconstruction par les anthropologues des concepts hérités du siècle des Lumières a fait couler beaucoup d'encre. La religion, qui est peut-être celui de ces concepts qui égare le plus les esprits, s'est avérée très résistante à la pierre de touche de la comparaison interculturelle. Les débats sur la nature de la religion remontent aux débuts mêmes de l'anthropologie comme discipline, voire au-delà. De nombreuses définitions en ont été proposées mais aucune ne s'est même approchée d'une acceptation universelle, surtout parce que ces définitions conventionnelles sont des versions sécularisées des approches abrahamiques, notamment protestantes, dont elles reproduisent l'essentialisme et l'intellectualisme. L'auteur affirme que l'on peut trouver une nouvelle manière d'aborder la question par l'étude attentive de la façon dont les phénomènes religieux sont conceptualisés en Asie du Sud, et notamment dont des types de religion distincts sont pratiqués dans des espaces typiquement différents. Telle qu'elle est pratiquée, la religion n'est pas une chose unique mais au moins trois activités différentes, et doit être conceptualisée ainsi. Mais dans ce cas, comment et pourquoi la vision totalisatrice est-elle encore si omniprésente et si puissante ? Pour chercher la réponse à cette question, il faut remonter à la constitution de la modernité et aux liens entre la religion et l'État-nation. À partir de là, pour avancer, il faut contester la manière dont la religion est devenue le dernier bastion de l'essentialisme à l'état pur.

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