



Indigenous Religion(s) as an Analytical Category

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Abstract

Today the most common uses of “indigenous religion(s)” as an analytical category and as a class in the study of religions are intimately linked to discourses on “indigenous peoples.” The article argues that this often creates problems for critical scholarship. It contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes about particular kinds of religions among particular kinds of peoples; it nurtures ideas about religious similarities across vast spans of time and space; and it blurs boundaries between scholarship and politics and religionising. A different analytical use of “indigenous religion(s)” that sometimes proves more rewarding is identified in some historical and anthropological case studies, where the category is employed contextually as a relational concept, as the opposite of “foreign religion(s),” and not restricted to indigenous peoples. To counter the biases produced by the current primacy of one taxonomic scheme, it is necessary to engage a greater variety of ways and orders of classification.

Keywords

indigenous religions, indigenous peoples, analytical category, classification, relational concept, the study of religions

A generic linking between the category “indigenous religions” and the concept of “indigenous peoples” is found in much contemporary scholarship. By “indigenous religions” most scholars now mean religions that have originated among or are considered original to groups of people who are regarded as “indigenous peoples.” On the basis of this a particular class of religions is put to work. Any random sample of encyclopaedias, text books, and study programmes where the category “indigenous religions” appears, is likely to confirm this.¹ Examples abound also in research articles and monographs. In most cases

¹ It is also reflected in popular perceptions. For example, Wikipedia has an entrance on “Indigenous religion” which reads (15.03.2012): “Indigenous religion refers to those religions which are native to indigenous peoples around the world.” And further: “They are one of the three broad divisions into which religions are categorised, along with world religions and new religious movements.” The reference supplied is to Graham Harvey’s *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (2000).

the interrelatedness between “indigenous religions” and “indigenous peoples” seems to be taken for granted. I think this state of affairs causes problems for critical scholarship.

I. Examples and Inspiration

It is not fair to charge anyone particular for the prevalent situation. In order to make a case it may nevertheless be justifiable to hold up a couple of distinguished scholars. Graham Harvey is among the most prolific publishers in the field. He has written, edited and co-edited several books on “indigenous religions” (Harvey 2000; 2002; Harvey & Ralls-MacLeod 2000; Harvey & Thompson 2005; cf. Harvey 2005) and serves as co-editor of Ashgate’s *Vitality of Indigenous Religions* series. His discussions of “guesthood” as an ethical research method that he has learned from visiting and doing research with Maoris (Harvey 2003), his focus on religious practices among indigenous peoples in diaspora situations (Harvey & Thompson 2005), and his willingness to revise old and adopt and adapt new categories in theorising (Harvey 2005), are challenging, original, and often useful for methodological and analytical purposes far beyond the works in which this appears.

James L. Cox’s most significant (but far from only) contribution is *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (2007). Here he sets out “to analyse critically the history of and the assumptions underlying the use of the category ‘Indigenous Religions’ as a distinct tradition alongside ‘world religions’” (2007: 1). He examines various existing approaches, including Harvey’s, and accuses them of being imbued with theological essentialisms and uncritical embracing of insider perspectives.

Partly in contrast to previous research, but also partly building on it, Cox then presents what he sees as a new and more scientific way of defining and studying “indigenous religions.” His “minimum definition” runs as follows:

[T]he primary characteristic of Indigenous Religions refers to its being bound to a location; participants in the religion are native to a place, or in Harvey’s words, they belong to it. The single and overriding belief shared amongst Indigenous Religions derives from a kinship-based world-view in which attention is directed towards ancestor spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice. (2007: 69)

In other words, the “indigenous” part of the twofold category “indigenous religions” is defined in relation to *location* and *kinship*; “that is,” Cox says, “it is limited to groups that construct their identity as belonging to a place and to a particular lineage” (2007: 89). He claims that he has succeeded in deriving this

“from an entirely empirical methodology that undermines once and for all the essentialist assumptions beneath the world religions paradigm” (2007: 75).²

Cox’s critical assessment is pertinent. His definition is highly valuable too, as long as it is seen as a heuristic tool that may be put to use differently in different cases. The trouble starts when he suggests that his definition should be installed as a primary classifier in the study of religions (2007: 92, 169-171). Already on the opening page Cox asserts that “there are as many indigenous religious traditions as there are indigenous peoples” (2007: 1). Throughout the book he seems to presume, like so many other scholars, that “indigenous peoples” are the ones who have “indigenous religions,” and other people not. Consequently he fails to note how his own approach falls prey to much of the same criticism that he has voiced against the works of others.

Before I go on, I should emphasize that it is largely because of what I have learned from the works of Harvey and Cox that I am able here to be critical of a particular perspective employed by both of them and by so many others. For that reason, many of their arguments will be repeated below, although my conclusions may sometimes somewhat differ from theirs. My argument is also indebted, much more than will become apparent below, to the works of philosopher Nils Oskal (2008; 2011) and scholars of religions Armin W. Geertz (2004), Jacob K. Olupona (2004), and Håkan Rydving (2010; 2011). In different ways, they all point at problems that emerge once indigenous people and their diverse and dynamic cultural assets, including religions, are systematically thought of as radically and structurally different from other people and other cultural expressions. They are also critical of prevalent ideas about widespread similarities between indigenous peoples across times and places, especially—but far from exclusively—when it comes to religions. None of them, however, attempts to undo the common association of “indigenous religions” with “indigenous peoples,” at least not explicitly.³

² Cox is very much inspired by Tomoko Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (2005). The concept of “the world religions paradigm” is from her. See also Bell 2008; Smith 1996; 1998.

³ Thanks to Hans Geir Aasmundsen, Monica Grini, Peter Jackson, Siv Ellen Kraft, Georges Midré, Einar Niemi, Håkan Rydving, Hanne Stenvaag, David Westerlund and an anonymous reviewer for critical and encouraging comments at different stages of the development of these thoughts and this text. Thanks also to my students for the genuine interest in, but also for the sometimes fierce opposition to, those of these ideas that I have presented to them. I would not be able to formulate my argument in a somewhat consistent manner were it not for their generous feedback. Any error, inconsistency or lack of clarity that still lingers is of course entirely my own fault.

II. Aim and Argument

I should immediately underscore that my argument is not intended to question the validity of the concept of “indigenous peoples,” nor do I want to discuss the academic usefulness of the concept of “religion.”⁴ My concern here is to point at the predominance of one particular understanding of “indigenous religions.” I argue that the taxonomy it is part of and the perspectives it entails, create several biases and analytical problems in scholarship. It often results in misrepresentations of historical situations and relationships, as well as in the reproduction of stereotypical images about certain kinds of religions among certain kinds of people.

There are, however, alternative ways of employing the category “indigenous religion(s).” It sometimes proves useful when applied in case studies, contextually, as a relational concept, in order to describe and analyse encounters and relations between representatives of different religions. In such cases it may enable students of religions to distinguish between, on the one hand, an already established religion among somebody somewhere and, on the other hand, a religion that among the same people at the same time and place is first and foremost exotic, foreign or alien—in other words, a religion that then belongs to somebody else and/or elsewhere. When the category is used this way, then the qualifying question is about whether a religion is indigenous to somebody specific, somewhere specific, at a specific moment. That somebody can potentially be anybody.

Like Harvey and Cox I want to encourage the study of a wider variety of religions (big and small, old and new) in a wider variety of places and among a wider variety of people. In order to achieve that, and bring more academic attention to often ignored fields of religions, and thus shake the so-called world religions paradigm and the overwhelming prevalence of so-called world religions (in Europe and North America, in the Middle East and in South, South-East and East Asia) in the curricula of most academic departments, I think it is crucial to start classifying religions in a wider variety of ways.

III. New Name, Same Game

The way the category “indigenous religions” today is used in much scholarship, as the original religions of “indigenous peoples,” is a fairly new invention

⁴ For discussions about “indigeneity” and the concept of “indigenous peoples,” see e.g., Friedman 2008; Merlan 2009; Trigger & Dalley 2010. For discussions about analytical uses of the concept of “religion,” see e.g., de Vries 2008; Saler 2009; Strenski 2010.

(Cox 2007: 4, 27-30; Niezen 2003: 2-4; cf. Long 2004).⁵ However, the cluster of “religions” most frequently referred to by the term, is not a new grouping at all. On the contrary, it may—as scholars like Talal Asad (1993), S. N. Balagangadhara (1994), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Jonathan Z. Smith (1996; 1998), and several others have shown—be traced back to medieval European ways of classifying the world religions-wise, classifications in which, put simply, Christianity was seen as the superior and only true “religion,” Judaism and Islam were seen as more or less mistaken deviations, and, finally, all the rest was seen as “idolatry” conducted by inferior “pagans” or “heathens.”

This imagined group of “the rest” later on lost some of its previous members when the so-called world religions paradigm appeared on the European and North American stages around the second half of the 19th century, at about the same time as the new humanistic and social scientific disciplines were founded—including anthropology and the new study of religions (Masuzawa 2005; cf. Cox 2007: 9-22, 33-39). Since then, in scholarship, the name of the group has varied, and changed several times: primitive religions, tribal religions, nature religions, primal religions, etc. Still, however, the grouping remains more or less intact. To a great extent, the same old taxonomic pattern prevails even today (Cox 2007: 9-31, 47-68; cf. Bell 2008; Masuzawa 2005; Smith 1996; 1998; 2004b).

Those religions—big or small, widespread or not—that do not fit either into the vague idea about a “world religion,” or into the equally elusive categories “popular religion,” “new religious movements” or “new religions” (also rest-categories it seems), or are perceived as antique and more or less dead religions; all those religions that are not fit into any of these categories are the ones that are usually placed below the heading “indigenous religions.” They are still simply “the rest.”

⁵ Cox (2007: 4) points at one of his own articles (1996) for the original suggestion that “indigenous religions” may be employed as a primary class in the study of religions. More contextual uses of the category, i.e., with reference to a particular religion or particular religions among particular people or in particular places, are found also in older scholarship (e.g., Parrinder 1959). Ronald Niezen (2003; 2009) has found that the present-day concept of “indigenous peoples,” as referring to a collective group that encompass distinct peoples from different corners of the world, did in fact not gain terrain in the social sciences and humanities until the 1980s. He traces this particular use of the term “indigenous peoples,” and its later appearance among certain peoples as a new globalised identity, to the International Labour Organization and the United Nations in the late 1950s and onwards. The World Council of Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (and its predecessors) are among the institutions that later have played key roles in shaping contemporary identity politics concerning “indigenous peoples” (cf. Merlan 2009; Minde 2008). The term “indigenous,” used with reference to particular people in particular places, has been around a lot longer. In English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it has been used about people meaning “born [...] in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to [a place]” at least since 1646 (in the form “indigene” its first appearance in written text dates 1598). The Latin term *indigena* is obviously even older.

The continuous changing of names has not significantly altered the content of the category—that is, the use of the category, the grouping, has not altogether changed. It is still used to refer to more or less the same eclectic group of religions. Changing names, and sounding more sympathetic and politically correct, does not necessarily mean improving the analytical usefulness of a categorization.

IV. The Missing Exclusive Sameness

A major problem in this taxonomic scheme is that most of the so-called “indigenous religions” are not similar at all. They are at least as different from each other as they are similar or bear resemblance to particular religions grouped under any of the other headings. And historically, or genealogically, the vast majority of them have had nothing to do with each other. For instance, in the past, there was no contact between practitioners of Bribri “religion” (see e.g., Bozzoli 1979), Maori “religion” (see e.g., Rosenfeld 1999), and Sami “religion” (see e.g., Rydving 1993).

They are grouped together, placed in the same category, for historical reasons *within scholarship* and within European history of ideas, that is, in the minds of scholars, because of the same scholars’ inherited ways of looking for and at the “religions” of the world (cf. Cox 2007: 9-68; Masuzawa 2005). They are not placed in the same category because they amongst themselves have had something special in common, independent of the European eye. What they share, historically and structurally, that they at the same time do not also share with other “religions,” is close to nothing. The only significant exception that I can come up with—what they actually might be said to have in common *especially*—is the way that they have been looked upon, and acted towards, from the outside, by Europeans, European descendants and others. But even their relationships to the various colonial powers and agents have, in practice, been a lot more complex, particular, and different from case to case than most portrayals of colonialism and so-called post-colonialism have admitted. Taken together, this makes the most common contemporary scholarly usage of the category “indigenous religions” highly problematic.

V. Communications, Reflections, and Consequences

Insofar as “indigenous religions” is used to refer to historical religions among those who today identify themselves and/or are identified by others as

"indigenous peoples," it must of course be taken into account that recent years have witnessed an immense increase in contact between people from different corners of the world. A growing international indigenous peoples movement and hard defined alternative and new religious movements, as well as massive advances in communications technologies and their availability, are among the factors that have facilitated such encounters. This, in effect, has created reflexive situations (Niezen 2003; 2009).

As people and movements have come to inspire and influence each other, across borders, and despite long distances, it has obviously had an impact on how they see themselves in relation to others. As different groups have united their efforts, some have also come to compare their different religious traditions, and to interpret and perform them in new ways in light of the other traditions that they in the same process have come to learn about and appreciate. Hence one can argue that in recent years some (but certainly not all) aspects of some (but certainly not all) religions of indigenous peoples have in fact become more similar, in practice and in interpretation, among some (but certainly not all) of their representatives.

This should be studied in its own particular contexts. It is a new situation, one in which certain globalising processes in some (but far from all) respects lead to homogenisation (cf. Appadurai 1996; Friedman 1994; Mignolo 2000; Robertson 1995). From the points of view of historical-critical scholarship, such relatively new-born relations cannot be projected onto the past. But the fact that once European categories like "indigenous," "religion," and of course "indigenous religion(s)" are now taken up, given new meanings, and used for self-identification by different people, in highly different societies around the world, who once had themselves and their practices designated as such by outsiders, makes the analytical use of these terms even more challenging.

VI. Approaches To, Through, and Beyond the Emic

To name and describe a religion and its key components with terms and concepts that its practitioners identify with and prefer is a matter of respect. Besides, sometimes it may be advantageous to adopt initially emic terms and categories for distinctive methodological and analytical purposes (cf. Harvey 2005; Porsanger 2004; Rydving 2010). Such strategies might open up for different perspectives, for different horizons, and for different insights. They might allow the analysis to set forth from different positions, some of which might sometimes be closer (but not equal) to the different positions, perspectives, and horizons of insiders. This might improve the chances of gaining closer

understandings of the studied subject, something which in turn might also enhance efforts and possibilities for more ethical research (see e.g., Denzin et al. 2008).

More approaches of this kind should no doubt be encouraged. But like in any other methodological and analytical approach, it should be done as consciously and transparently as possible. In most scholarly uses of the term “indigenous religions,” it is not made clear that we are dealing with a category that has also become proper to some of those thought of as adhering to some of the same religions—and that we in many cases therefore are also dealing with a now widespread but far from fully shared emic category. Even more rarely are we told that the employment of an at once emic and etic category is part of a conscious analytical strategy. On the contrary, it often seems to be taken for granted as part of an established disciplinary vocabulary.

What is more, it should be obvious that an approach via initially emic terms cannot be the only path permitted in the study of religions. We do not reserve for Christians to define and classify Christianity—or “religions” for that sake—for us. Nor do we rely entirely on their vocabulary for our supply of analytical categories when we study Christianities (whatever that might be).⁶ The fundamental problems this would bring about, for non-confessional scholarship, do not evaporate when changing Christians and Christianities for any other religious group and its religion.

In the study of religions, like in the rest of the humanities and social sciences, a fundamental aim is to see the subjects of study from several different angles. This includes trying to understand, as far as possible, what it looks like for those personally and/or collectively involved in it, or for those that experience it as part of themselves or as theirs. Careful and respectful interaction and dialogue, be it with human beings, texts, and/or objects—preferably over considerable amounts of time, in their proper language, and guided by their manners, invitations, and signs—, learning from them and applying what they teach, might be one way of getting as close as we can (see e.g., Flood 1999).

Nevertheless, to try to see things from different perspectives also implies being critical of dominant or one-sided discourses and images, whoever produces them. Furthermore it entails to resist taking even the most repu-

⁶ It is now generally agreed that the extensive presence of Christian terms, tropes, categories and idioms in most European and European derived languages (which are yet the major academic languages), is most likely to create a religious (Christian) bias when applied as methodological and analytical tools and lenses, both when analysing different Christianities and, of course, when studying other “religions” (cf. Asad 1993; Balagangadhara 1994).

table ideas for granted. To approach a subject of study critically is, from an academic point of view, to take it seriously. To approach all kinds of religions with a more or less equal dose of what some have called "hermeneutics of suspicion," may be seen as a way of showing similar respect to our different subjects of study.

VII. Politics, Ethics, and Academics

The appropriations of the terms "indigenous," "religion," "indigenous religion," and "indigenous religions" are evidently politically charged in several complex ways (Long 2004; Niezen 2000; 2003; 2009). For instance, in many political, legal, and religious projects it may be beneficial to be seen as similar and belonging to the same category, be it "indigenous," "religion," "indigenous religion(s)," or all of them. At the same time the same categories can be used to establish firm borders that distinguish one large and complex group from another large and complex group, like "indigenous" versus "non-indigenous."

The wishes and initiatives among those who today call themselves indigenous peoples to join forces and stand united, in political, legal, cultural, religious, and other fights against and negotiations with what is seen as distinct groups of colonialists, are understandable indeed. For most of those who today identify themselves and each other as indigenous peoples, abuse and oppression are salient parts of their histories. Foreign academics have in many cases contributed to colonial and postcolonial structures and acts of domination (for testimonies see e.g., Kuokkanen 2007; Smith 1999). This calls for extra caution, for extra sensitivity, and for extra listening to everybody involved in or exposed to research.

Recent debates about reflexivity in general, and about what some has called "indigenous methodologies" in particular (Denzin et al. 2008; Kuokkanen 2007; Smith 1999), have brought new attention to the importance of learning how to do research from the subjects of study, and to the ethical obligation of safeguarding their different concerns. It should go without saying that the same carefulness must be applied in studies with any group that is being oppressed and that has an ambivalent history of interaction with researchers and research, regardless of what they may call themselves.

Privately, students of religions, like anyone else, are of course free to side with any party they like. Every colleague I know who has worked closely with people who call themselves indigenous, supports wholeheartedly—although in different ways—their struggles for social justice, political representation, cultural recognition, and welfare and opportunities for their

children. I do the same. That most scholars are not afraid to say so is just as it should be. The problem is rather that it is not always clear to everybody—neither to most scholars themselves it seems, nor to their audiences—what hat(s) they are wearing on what occasions. The uncritical coupling of the category “indigenous religions” with indigenous peoples does not help in sorting this out. Far from representing precise and unambiguous scholarly language, this schematic use of the category contributes in blurring the boundaries between politics and scholarship, between activism and academic work, and between religionising and analysing.

VIII. Clarifications

I do not think it is always possible to know completely, or for sure, all the facets of the position from where we stand and talk. Hence it is not necessarily achievable to become utterly clear about all the hats we are wearing in different occasions. What I call for is more reflection, transparency, and honesty about it (also about our uncertainties), and I think these challenges are better met if we start by revising the ground, i.e., the categories and the language that we use.

Nor am I saying that scholarship can ever become apolitical. When doing research with somebody, or on something that somebody reckons as her own, we get involved—regardless of whether we like it or not. What we say and write can (and is sometimes likely to) affect that somebody (and others) in many ways, some of which cannot always be predicted. To take all precautions possible in order to avoid—or at least minimize the chances for—negative impact (whatever that might be in each case) is first and foremost an ethical duty. The less powerful those involved and exposed, the greater becomes the responsibility to listen to their wishes and demands.

Nonetheless, that we can never become fully impartial or objective is not necessarily an argument for turning scholarship into politics, activism or religionising. Activist scholarship of different kinds and degrees have its legitimate places in the academy as long as it strives to be as explicit and transparent as possible about its positions and purposes (see Hale 2006 for a good example). This goes for religious scholarship too, which has its place in theology and should be recognized as such. Contrary to this, other kinds of critical scholarship still consider it a basic tenet to strive towards freeing scholarship from politics, activism and religionising, despite the now common acceptance of the impossibility of ultimately fulfilling this ideal. I mostly belong to this latter camp.

IX. Pitfalls and Mix Ups

Unless we pay careful and critical attention also to our own thinking, and to the rules of our own guild, we might—consciously or not—come to confuse critical research with becoming accomplices in particular political and religious projects. One frequent result is the production and dissemination of what from a scholarly point of view are ahistorical images, or new myths, of “indigenous religions.” Other consequences may be the hiding of differences within the larger group now defined as one, and the suppression of a heterogeneity that—when seen from other perspectives—might become more visible as a result of globalisation (cf. Appadurai 1996; Friedman 1994; Mignolo 2000; Robertson 1995), as well as the quieting of voices that want to articulate, highlight, and maintain particularities, pluralities, and all kinds of alternative viewpoints within any group or in society at large (cf. Johnson 2008). Yet another outcome is the upholding of a stereotypical image of indigenous peoples as being tied to rare, age old, and unchanged religious customs very different from the religions of other people today (cf. Geertz 2004), when in fact a great number of those who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as indigenous people, are Bahais, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, or members of any other religion or variety of a religion.

The often taken for granted use of the category “indigenous religions” as referring to what are perceived as the original religions of indigenous peoples, may be of great help in claiming and obtaining rights and protection. It is of enormous value in the legal and political struggles of many indigenous peoples. Sometimes, in the short run, it might also be useful in academic department politics. But—because of all the biases and problems identified above—it is usually not particularly helpful as an academic category aimed at distinguishing different kinds of religions on a general basis. It may even distort otherwise useful analytical approaches aimed at understanding complex social and historical processes. If we stick with the old system of classification or taxonomy—as I think too many scholars have done uncritically—, not only do we then risk reproducing old and problematic Eurocentric views on the world, we also confuse a rather new-found identity, that has also become an ideological concept, and a political and legal tool, with an analytical category.

X. Critical Suggestions

James L. Cox aims at “shifting comparative studies away from facile generalizations towards responses to carefully constructed theoretical questions” (Cox 2007: 92), and he points to case studies as the starting point for developing and trying out such questions. He also stresses the importance of accounting for “globalizing forces, which have produced a quite complex arrangement of new and/or syncretic religious expressions that in many cases have transformed, disrupted or even displaced traditional localized, kinship-based religions” (Cox 2007: 169). Graham Harvey (2005; Harvey & Thompson 2005) argues for much of the same and I agree.

Yet Harvey acknowledges that parts of his work involve “strategic essentialisms.” He is also open about his extracurricular activist activities and, much in line with so-called postcolonial critiques, he reflects on how such activities partly inspire, inform, and overlap with his stricter academic activities (see his personal website www.grahamharvey.org; cf. Harvey 2000; 2002; 2005). Last but not least, in no way does he suggest that his is the only way to go about it studying indigenous religions. Cox adopts a different position. He asserts that he has overcome all essentialist assumptions inherent in the prevailing paradigm and prescribes his own way of defining and classifying as a perspective “that eventually could revolutionize the way we think of, and hence study, religion itself” (Cox 2007: 171). This should call for a critical appraisal of key components of his proposals.

Cox defines “religion” as “identifiable communities that base their beliefs and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable realities on a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively from generation to generation” (2007: 85). Recall how he restricts “indigenous” to “groups that construct their identity as belonging to a place and to a particular lineage” (2007: 89) and his overarching definition of “indigenous religions” becomes:

[T]hose identifiable communities whose traditions relate to the place to which they belong and whose authority is derived from the chain of memory traceable to ancestors. The beliefs and experiences of these identifiable communities refer to postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities, which are connected to the locality to which the people belong and are related integrally to ancestral traditions. (2007: 89)

This way of looking at it is likely to prove useful in many more cases than the ones from Alaska and Zimbabwe that Cox presents (2007: 95-139). It may permit students to expose important aspects and contexts of religions. As a heuristic tool it has bright prospects. But Cox’s own use of it, I believe, comes with skeletons hidden in the closet.

XI. Challenging Cox's Criteria

It appears that his "indigenous religions" have their opposites: "By definition," he says, "kinship-based religions are not and cannot be universal" (Cox 2007: 69). This implies a distinction between indigenous religions and universal religions. Since religion equals identifiable community, he then also distinguishes, at least implicitly, between indigenous communities and universal communities. Consequently what scholars should look for in order to identify an indigenous religion is the character of the community.

This emphasis on place-bound, small-scale, and—adding the focus on ancestors—traditional societies, as a criterion for the grouping of otherwise dissimilar "religions" in one class, resembles some of the earliest attempts at classification in the study of religions; pioneer models which were seen as problematic and unsatisfying already at the time when they were first proposed (cf. Cox 2007: 9-22, 33-39; Masuzawa 2005; Smith 1996; 1998). Moreover, as noted by the disciplinary forefathers over a hundred years ago, although many religious persons and institutions would claim that their religion is universal, none fills the criteria when looked upon from the outside. That some religions are more widespread than others is a different matter, which merely means that they relate to more places—or that they are seen as belonging in several different locations.

What about the kinship criteria? Cox writes (2007: 69): "amongst indigenous peoples, kinship rules religion; it defines its fundamental characteristic and dictates the one belief all Indigenous Religions share in common." My objection is that kinship rules religion in most cases and almost everywhere—among all kinds of people. Those who identify with and embody religions with universal ambitions are usually no exceptions. They too tend to relate closely to specific social groups, to smaller identifiable communities, or to kins, who in turn see themselves and their more or less shared practices and beliefs as belonging intimately to specific locations. Do not most groups somehow construct their identity as belonging to a place and to a particular lineage?

Attention towards ancestors, even as "spirits," who are seen as belonging especially to a community and its place(s), is also far more common in religious life and practice than Cox acknowledges. Christians and Christianities, excluded from Cox's "indigenous religions," may well serve as examples: Most become and are Christians because their family is Christian. Besides, Christians often speak about being part of a larger community or a larger family, meaning their local church, or the particular denomination to which they adhere, or even Christianity at large. Some of them may even

claim that they belong to a particular Christian lineage. Deceased members of the community, family, or lineage can play prominent parts in Christian communities, as role models, as saints, and even as gods! And again, the community, family, or kin may be seen as intimately related to certain specific places or regions: the home, the church, the city, the province, the country, etc. (cf. Beyer 2003; Fredriksen 2000; Graziano 2007; Vilaça & Wright 2009).

Practically everybody, and not just indigenous peoples, may identify—in various degrees, on different levels, in distinct contexts, and in diverse ways—not only with one social group, community, or kin, but often with several, of similar or different size. Furthermore each of those groups, communities, or kins, may be seen by its members as related or as belonging—in various degrees, on different levels, in distinct contexts, and in diverse ways—to one or several specific places or locations, of similar or different extension. Moreover, such identities and identifications are likely to change with time—again in various degrees, on different levels, in distinct contexts, and in diverse ways—also when they relate to religions.

XII. Questionable Boundaries

Cox accentuates how both scholarship and its subjects of study are socially embedded in particular and often very different practices and contexts. But in arguing for his definition, and when putting it to work, he lets the views of some religious practitioners merge with his own theoretical suppositions, without this being critically discussed. When answering his carefully constructed theoretical questions, he arbitrarily uses the postulates of certain insiders—i.e., criteria internal to their religions/communities, dogmas, or their own identifications with a place and a lineage—, and not those of others, in order to decide whether a religion, theoretically, is indigenous (or universal) or not. His own evaluation of whose identifications are legitimate (or authentic), and whose are not, is what ultimately decides the content of his concept of “indigenous religions.” What is more, despite what Cox claims, these evaluations seem to be done on the basis of long-standing and widespread *a priori* essentialist notions—scholarly inherited and highly ideological both historically and today—about indigenous peoples and who they are and the particular kinds of religions that do and do not originally belong to them. I, at least, cannot see how he gets around this.

People and communities do not necessarily stop considering themselves indigenous just because they take up a foreign religion, not even if their

new religion has universal ambitions, nor if they have quit completely the religion of their ancestors and relatives (if they had one). This prosaic observation demonstrates, contrary to what Cox says (unless this disqualifies them from his concept of indigenous peoples), that kinship does *not always* rule religion among indigenous peoples.

In some cases, people may even conceive of their newly adopted religion as indigenous. They might regard it a continuation of the old one, or a distinct (and according to some, a better) expression of the same. Bahais among Bribris in Talamanca, Costa Rica, is a case in point (Rojas 2009; Tafjord 2003). They have emphasized aspects of the Bahai religion that to them resemble what they refer to (or to be precise, that I translate) as their most indigenous traditions,⁷ and often ignored other aspects of it that conflict with such traditions. At the same time they have integrated elements from the traditions that they consider most indigenous into their Bahai practices. Hence they have indigenized the Bahai religion in at least two ways (and, obviously, in the same process, they have also bahai-ized what they see as their most indigenous traditions). They have done so to the extent that today many of them talk about their Bahai religion as an indigenous religion. What they actually mean, however, when saying that their Bahai religion is or has become an indigenous religion, is not a straightforward matter. It varies. At least four different meanings may be identified, sometimes partly interrelated or overlapping, but far from representing a simple variation of scope. These are (starting with the most common): (1) a religion that is essentially the same as the traditions passed on from the earlier generations of Bribris (the ancestors); (2) a religion that belongs to and among the Bribris in Talamanca; (3) a religion that belongs to and among the original inhabitants of America; and (4) (more rarely, but on the increase) a religion that belongs to and among indigenous peoples from all over the world (for more, see Tafjord forthcoming).

Neo-shamanism—that Cox (2007: 150-160) keeps out of his privileged group—may also be taken up by certain persons and groups, at certain places, and reckoned by them as belonging there and to them. They may also see it as authoritative transmissions and continuations of ancestral

⁷ Most Bribris do not speak much English. They speak Bribris and/or Spanish. In Bribris they employ a distinction between *skowak* and *sikua* which they translate into Spanish *indígena* or *indio* versus *extranjero* or *blanco*. In both languages (in Bribris the Spanish terms are used as loanwords) they also distinguish between *religiones* (which they consider historically a *sikua* thing) and their own *tradiciones* (which until recently, they claim, made *religión* superfluous among them); the latter they variously refer to as *tradiciones indígenas*, *lo indígena*, or (when comparisons are involved and it becomes a matter of degrees) *lo más indígena*.

traditions. That others may disagree with them does not obstruct the argument (cf. Johnson 2008). Any other religion may likewise at any time become reckoned as indigenous by persons and groups at places where it was previously seen as somebody else's. Those who before were seen as the ancestors of others, may with time become integrated in the lineage of one's own kin—and ancestors that for a long time have been seen as belonging to the group and the place, may be ascribed new roles in a new or modified religion. To separate one religion from another is not always easy, especially not if the practitioners' own diverse and dynamic constructions of identities are taken into account.

XIII. A Relational and Contextual Concept

A more longstanding (although not so common) use of "indigenous" as an adjective to "religion(s)," is found in case studies which deal with processes of introduction or adoption of a foreign religion into a particular society or territory that is or has been dominated by or associated with (an)other religion(s). This use of "indigenous religion(s)" is found in historical studies, for instance in studies of the spread of Buddhism to Daoist China (e.g., Kohn 1995) and to Shinto Japan (e.g., Underwood 1934), or in studies of how Christianity in Scandinavia met with Norse religion (e.g., Wellendorf 2006) and Sami religion (e.g., Rydving 1993; 2010). It also appears in anthropological studies with a focus on structurally similar cases and processes in more recent times, like Birgit Meyer's study of how Pietist Protestantism has been introduced to and met local traditions among the Peki Ewe in Ghana (Meyer 1999), or Terje Østebø's study of how Salafism has contributed to religious change among the Oromo in Ethiopia, including how this one variety of Islam, introduced from the outside in later decades, has met and challenged forms of Islam that have thrived there for much longer (Østebø 2012).⁸

In these case studies the question of indigenesness is related to religions, not to people. It is, like in Harvey's and Cox's proposals, about the character of a relationship between somebody or some place and a religion. But here this kind of relationship is not restricted to "indigenous peoples." Whether the people that practice the religion or claim ownership to

⁸ There are only a few studies of this kind that actually talks about indigenous "religion(s)." The routine, it seems, is to use other nouns alongside the adjective indigenous, e.g., indigenous "traditions," indigenous "practices," indigenous "beliefs," or indigenous "spirituality." Sometimes "religious" is added to this as a specifying adjective: "indigenous religious traditions," "indigenous religious practices," etc.

it are indigenous or not, is a different matter. In this perspective, any kind of people can have an indigenous religion.

At the heart of this approach lies a comparison: A religion is seen as indigenous in contrast to another religion (or something else that it becomes compared with). The former is recognized as having a more intimate relationship with a particular somebody or place than the latter, which in turn is considered more exotic or foreign. For analytical purposes it may make sense to make this distinction, and apply the adjective "indigenous," once a second religion (or something comparable) with a less intimate relationship to the same somebody or place, enters or is found on the arena of the study.

The relation between somebody and/or some place and a religion is contextually contingent. In addition to social and spatial it is temporal. It is situated in a particular social setting at a particular place in a particular moment or period. The indigeneness of one religion versus the exoticness of another is the product of particular historical encounters, circumstances and dynamics.

From this perspective it is not about a class of particular religions. Rather, this use of the adjective points to a kind of relation that may potentially involve any religion, among any kind of people. It is the student who identifies the relation and superimposes the category for analytical purposes, after first dealing carefully with the empirical data at hand. Representatives of the religions involved in the historical events may of course have different views on the meaning of the term "indigenous," on the character of the relation, and on the question of indigeneness.

XIV. Degrees of Belonging

A heuristic employment of "indigenous religion(s)" as a relational concept may be helpful in studies of encounters of religions and situations of religious diversity and change. It may be used to distinguish between at least two religions on a scale which has insider versus outsider, own versus alien, domestic versus foreign or indigenous versus exotic as opposite or contrasting poles. This approach inevitably implies an evaluation of the religions' belonging in a society and/or place at a particular time.

One way of assessing it is to consider the extent to which a religion can be seen as home-grown or originating from within the society or territory. However, when looked upon from the outside, the historical development of a religion in a given society or place is almost always a complex

combination of both internal and external influences. In addition, or instead, depending on the questions guiding the study, it may be relevant to consider how embedded a religion is in the society and/or place. To what extent can it be seen as an integral part of the society or territory? To what extent is it marked and rooted, physically, historically, and/or socially, in the particular religious landscape at the particular moment or period under study? Is it taken for granted there? Is its presence questioned? How naturalized is it? Or, put differently, how “indigenised” is it?⁹ Tensions and disputes within the society or territory must of course be accounted for. They are part of the historical situation under evaluation. Further criteria for the assessment may vary according to both empirical and analytical contexts. What is meant by belonging must eventually be accounted for in each case.

The indigenosity of a religion then becomes a matter of degrees—and difference in degrees of belonging becomes significant for the analytical usefulness of the approach. The less different the identified religions’ relations to a society or territory are, on a scale of belonging, the less meaningful, relevant, and useful is the distinction likely to be. Among those who point at examples of much more complex empirical situations beyond the perspectives permitted by the dichotomy, are Paul Christopher Johnson (2002) and Østebø (2012). It works best with extremes.

Typically, it may be instructive to talk about indigenous religion(s), as opposed to foreign religion(s), when analysing contacts and movements across different kinds of borders in which two or more religions play a part. Early phases of encounters (like those that took place in the Americas in the 16th century) and enduring conflicts (prompted for instance by colonisation and mission) may provide some of the most obvious cases. Yet the distinction may sometimes prove convenient also in studies of situations or periods of religious diversity in which peaceful interaction or coexistence is predominant.

Inasmuch as questions of belonging are often more than likely to be given political significance, even when that is not intended in the first place, this is an extra incentive for why we should strive to be as clear as possible about the premises behind our uses of specific analytical categories and criteria. When a category becomes particularly sensitive or ambiguous, for historical, linguistic, political, social or other reasons, then it may be wise to consider alternative analytical categories, either as supplements

⁹ An analogy that might be good to think with is how once foreign words become taken up, integrated, and eventually taken for granted as part of a language.

in order to make the intentions and nuances of the approach clearer, or—in more delicate cases—as substitutes. Among the adjectives that spring to my mind as potential supplements or substitutes for “indigenous,” when talking about thoroughly contextualised cases of religion(s), are “own,” “domestic,” “local”, and “traditional,” or simply the specific geographical name or the name of the social group, e.g., Andean religion(s) or Berber (or Imazighen) religion(s), or combinations of adjectives and names such as traditional Andean religion(s) or local Berber religion(s). Some of these alternatives are already widely in use in different ways—and different uses in different cases contribute to revealing important differences at once empirical and methodological.

XV. Favouring Multiple Ways of Classifying

The complexities of cases of religions—and of the relations between them—cannot be properly understood if they are reduced to a dichotomy of “indigenous” versus “foreign” and evaluated only on a scale of belonging. There is always much more at play. That is why various analytical categories and scales are always better employed alongside each other.

There may of course still be cases in which it is analytically helpful to operate with a category for religions of indigenous peoples, or for religions that have originated among or are considered original to indigenous peoples. But, as I have tried to demonstrate above, for critical scholarship, this perspective may often become more disturbing than helpful. The prevalence and primacy of a taxonomic scheme that favours the linking of “indigenous religions” with “indigenous peoples” (and vice versa), and that veils and subdues other ways of classifying, is nevertheless firmly established in contemporary scholarly practices. It arbitrarily distinguishes “indigenous religions” (as the religions of indigenous peoples) from other kinds of religions (presumably pertaining to other peoples). Although a lot of empirical data runs counter to and challenges the distinctions entailed by this taxonomy, it keeps being reproduced almost uniformly.

At the same time there is no lack of alternative taxonomies. Plenty of models are available, but they are usually employed as secondary or tertiary axes of classifications, i.e., they are typically put to work *after* the primary taxonomy has already categorised a religion as either (belonging originally to) indigenous (peoples) or not (the latter usually means that it has been classified as a world religion, a new religion or an antique religion instead, which of course is almost equally problematic). Academic analyses

of religions among all kinds of peoples in all kinds of places may be done in a greater variety of ways if the now predominant taxonomic scheme more often gets removed or is replaced by alternative schemes.

A rich assortment of taxonomic proposals is found, for example, in Jonathan Z. Smith's *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (2004a). Consider, for instance, his religion(s) of "here, there, and anywhere" (Smith 2004c). These categories may well be filled with different content from case to case. Thomas A. Tweed provides yet other alternatives. In *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006) he suggests that to study religions may be to study itineraries, and thus to focus on how religions travel and how they may dwell, with and between people and places and moments. The means by which they travel and the domains in which they operate, and how they change and persist along the way, may then sometimes become more important than questions about where and to whom they originally belong(ed). Graham Harvey's contributions are also significant in terms of challenging established taxonomies and offering alternatives, although none of his proposals escapes completely—as far as I can see—from a linking of indigenous religions with indigenous peoples. In the edited introductory text book *Religions in Focus* (Harvey 2009) the simple but ingenious ordering principle is religious practitioners in reverse alphabetical order. It starts with a chapter on Zoroastrians and ends with one on Bahais. It also includes chapters called "Shamans and Animists," "Practitioners of Indigenous Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora," and "Indigenous Religionists in North America," which deal mostly, but not exclusively, with religions among different indigenous peoples. His *Animism* (Harvey 2005) and his co-edited *Indigenous Diasporas and Dislocations* (Harvey & Thompson 2005) also contest conventional ideas about both religions of indigenous peoples and the indigenousness of religions. The perspectives proposed and promoted by James L. Cox would add further to this, if only he would let go of the consistent linking—and restricting—of "indigenous religions" to indigenous peoples.

A greater variety of analytical approaches and taxonomic schemes should more often be applied on all of the things we opt for calling "religion," independent of what class or sub-group those different things have formerly been put in. Different models will probably prove more or less useful from case to case. As philosopher Narahari Rao has pointed out, "[t]he pre-condition for a science of culture is not that of an availability of descriptions of a *multiple number of cultures*, but that of an availability of *multiple descriptions* of a single culture" (Rao 1996: 195, italics in original). The same could be said about a science of religion(s). Multiple descriptions

require the use of multiple terms, multiple definitions and thus multiple concepts and categories, as well as multiple positions from where to approach the subject of study. Instead of letting one biased and problematic taxonomy rule most of the game, scholarship on religions would be better off, I think, if multiple ways of classifying and analysing were encouraged to flow more freely and to defy each other more openly in all of its "fields" of study. Always keeping in mind, of course, that any comparative exercise, and hence any category, is imperfect and only suited for some purposes, not for all.

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Guillaume Postel and the Primordial Origins of the Middle East

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Abstract

Guillaume Postel is often credited as one of the founding fathers of the modern "orientalist" European study of the Middle East, and of Arabic, Islam, and the Quran in particular. He published his most influential work in 1544, calling on the French king to lead a Crusade against the Ottomans and usher in a new, apocalyptic age. Although usually credited as a pioneer in the comparative study of Semitic languages, an influential figure in French-Ottoman relations, and as one of the first Europeans to study the Quran in comparison with the Bible, it was the unique sixteenth-century renaissance combination of apocalypticism, European nationalism, and alchemy behind the specific formation of Postel's universal linguistic theories that would most influence future scholarship. The following pages examine the historical context in which Postel produced his work with particular attention to the apocalypticism of his religious ideas and the kabbalistic sources of his linguistic scholarship.

Keywords

Guillaume Postel, middle east, orientalism, apocalypticism, ottomans, semitic

I. Introduction

In 1544, less than a decade before he was appointed Professor of Mathematics and Oriental Languages at the recently established College Royal in Paris, Guillaume Postel published his *De orbis terrae concordia* in which he declared a single world government and a universalist world religion. According to Postel, the king of France would initiate this new world order after leading a successful crusade against the Muslims of the Ottoman empire, preparing the world for the second coming of Christ, the new Enoch, whose arrival had been prophesied millennia earlier in ancient Egypt and preserved in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Postel's work was motivated by notion of an anti-nationalist pre-apocalyptic utopia hearkening back to an age of human unity before the

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