

Cartographies of the Imagination: The Discourse of Religion and the Mapping of Indic Traditions After Colonialism

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Modern colonialism won its great victories not so much through military and technological prowess as through its abilities to create secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order.

(Ashis Nandy, 1983, *The Intimate Enemy*: ix)

Introduction

Signs at the end of the twentieth century suggest that the era of European (though not necessarily western) domination of the globe has come to an end. We are living through a period of history that Cornel West has called 'the passing of the Age of Europe'. Indeed for some macro-historians such as Andre Gunder Frank (1998), the dominance of Europe in recent centuries is more accurately seen as a small phase within a larger historical trend of an Asian-centred world.¹ This is important, since as the age of overt imperialism fades, so does the illusion that European world-views and epistemologies constitute a wholly natural way of understanding the world and our human experience of it. The Enlightenment master narrative of European ideas and values as the apex of civilization - an attitude which under-girded European imperialism - is now increasingly being seen for what it is - namely one of a number of competing cultural constructions of reality. In other words, in a cross-cultural and post-colonial context the **provinciality** of European ways of understanding the world, is increasingly being highlighted with reference to the historical specificity of its origins and provenance.

This questioning of European and more generally western self-confidence has been going on from a number of directions. From the outside we have a variety of interest groups, communities, movements and social trends in the former western colonies challenging past injustices and Eurocentric hubris. There has also been a loss of self-confidence and guilt-ridden hand wringing in the west. This can be seen as a tension in debates about multiculturalism, with diaspora minority communities and majority white westerners questioning the certainty of the way forward. After two world wars, the Holocaust, fears about nuclear devastation, concerns about biological engineering and the damage we are doing to the environment, many westerners, have become increasingly suspicious of the master narratives of their own culture. This two pronged assault - from outside and from within - has created fissures in the European Enlightenment project in the post-war period. This is no more clear than in the development of poststructuralist, and so-called postmodernist trends and theories, which question the pretensions of the universality of western rationality and modernity. This point for instance, is well noted by the French thinker Michel Foucault in an interview conducted in 1978 in Japan. Foucault, today considered one of the high priests of post-structuralism, is asked whether Asia has anything to offer westerners looking to overcome what the Japanese interviewer calls the crisis of European thought . Foucault makes the following reply:

European thought finds itself at a turning point. This turning point, on an historical scale, is nothing other than the end of imperialism. The crisis of Western thought is identical to the end of imperialism [and] has produced no supreme philosopher who excels in signifying that crisis. ... For it is the end of the era of Western philosophy. Thus, if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe.

(Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault, in Carrette, ed., 1999: 113)

The Map of Religion

The colonial domination of the West over the rest in recent centuries has caused many western categories, ideas and paradigms to appear more universal and normative than they might

otherwise have seemed. The category of religion is one such category and could be described as a key feature in the imaginative cartography of western modernity. The concept serves as a cognitive map for surveying, classifying and interpreting diverse cultural and historical terrain and allows a distinction to be drawn between secular and religious spheres of human life.

However, as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us map is not territory . A key factor in the *claimed* universality of certain western concepts and the resultant confusion between map and territory I will suggest is the recent history of European imperialism and the effect that this has had upon the cultures of the colonized. Maps are powerful things. In the context of the 1947 British partition of India, we can see how the stroke of a pen across a map could determine the lives and deaths of millions of people (J. Brian Harley, *Maps, Knowledge and Power* , 1988). What effects do our cognitive maps of cultures have upon human lives and identities?

As a number of scholars have noted both the *modern* concept of religion as a system of beliefs and practices and the discipline of Religious Studies is a product of the Enlightenment, though of course the term has roots and rival etymologies going back to Cicero and Lactantius (see King, 1999: ch.2). Recently, there has been a number of works that have called into question the central unifying concept of the discipline of the history of religions —the category of religion itself. These include works by J.Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Russ McCutcheon, Tim Fitzgerald, and my own contribution to this debate.² Perhaps the first person to draw attention to problems with the category in a systematic fashion was the scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his 1961 book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.³ Smith argues that:

the term religion is confusing, unnecessary and distorting ... progress in understanding - even at the academic level - of the traditions of other people throughout history and throughout the world, are both seriously blocked by our attempt to conceptualize what is involved in each case in terms of (a) religion. (p 50).

Despite this, Smith remained an eager advocate of inter-faith dialogue throughout his career. He proposed replacing the category of religion with 'cumulative tradition' on the one hand and 'personal faith' on the other. For Smith what links these two dimensions is 'the living

person' (see Smith, 1961:156). Faith is a kind of "inner religious experience" (p. 156) or "quality" (p. 171). "To be religious is an ultimately personal act." (p. 177). In emphasizing this Smith perpetuates the post-Enlightenment privatization of the religious as an inner state or feeling, a characterization established by figures such as Schleiermacher, William James and Rudolph Otto. This characterization feeds into one important strand of inter-religious dialogue and the comparative study of religion in the twentieth century - namely the emphasis placed upon religious experience as the locus of religiosity and therefore also the ground for the meeting of different traditions in the search for a common mystical core to the various world religions.⁴

However, the emphasis upon experience and the concept of 'faith' are also culturally loaded terms. Critiques of the modernist 'rhetoric of experience' (Sharf) have been put forward by Denys Turner (1994), Grace Jantzen (1995), Robert Sharf (1998), and myself (King, 1999) on a variety of grounds, but especially for the way in which medieval Christian mystics and ancient South Asian traditions have been translated by the psychologizing prism of western modernity into what sociologist Paul Heelas has called Self-spiritualities (1996, The New Age Movement).

The privatization of modern notions of mysticism, inspired by the seminal work of William James, similarly ignores the shifting meanings and constructions of the mystical throughout its largely Christian history. In my view scholars interested in exploring what has been called Asian mysticism need to pay far more attention to the ways in which the construction of a number of stereotypical images of the East -- D. T. Suzuki's Zen Buddhism, Vivekananda's or even Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, Patanjali's Yoga, Lao Tse's Dao De Jing - have been pressed into service in the last century as token representatives of something called the global phenomenon of mysticism. Whether colonized and homogenized by the perennialists or essentialized and segregated by the constructivists, such stereotypes of the Mystic East have been used to make a variety of competing claims about the mystical, spiritual or other-worldly nature of Asian cultures. Contemporary debates within the field have also served to locate certain aspects of Asian and western cultures within a modernist and psychologized framework that misreads the phenomenon captured by the term mysticism on a number of levels.⁵ The ongoing significance of the modern psychological turn can be seen not only in the emphasis that is placed upon experience as the locus of religiosity within the study of religions (and especially

the study of mysticism) but also in the contemporary shift in certain circles away from the term 'religion' and towards a privatized and consumer-oriented notion of spirituality .

There are similar problems with an emphasis upon notions of faith and the world faiths . Faith may be an important determinant of identity within the Christian cumulative tradition, but even here it is less significant historically than the Protestant Reformation might suggest. In medieval Europe most people were 'Christians' not through an explicit self-willed faith but through their allegiance to the traditions and practices of their kin. For scholars such as Gabriel Le Bras it is not even clear that we can talk of Christianity as the religion of pre-Revolutionary France except in the limited sense of being so deemed by the monarchical constitution. Similarly, the notion of 'faith' itself has gone through a number of shifts in meaning, most notably the shift from 'being 'faithful to' to 'having faith in' something. More importantly for my argument, faith, particularly in the modern sense of 'belief' has not been a central feature of identity construction in most of the Asian traditions with which Christianity has come into contact.

Sraddhaa, the Sanskrit term usually translated as faith in Buddhism is not faith in the sense of assent to a series of metaphysical or theological propositions nor in the sense of a life of committed devotion and piety. Sraddhaa traditionally means confidence in the teacher and the path and it is often represented as a preliminary stage in the Buddhist tradition to be superseded by the wisdom or analytical insight (prajnaa) that derives from mental cultivation (bhaavanaa) the practice of the eightfold path.⁶ In the ancient Buddhist traditions of India what determined the nikaaya you belonged to was how you practised - the Praatimoksa - the set of monastic rules that you accepted, and not assent to a particular doctrines or set of beliefs. It is not so much that Buddhists did not differentiate on the basis of different doctrinal interpretations of the Dharma, but rather that this was not the KEY feature in determining affiliation and nikaaya identity. My point is not that Buddhists do not have faith in things. I would venture that we all adopt a variety of views that we would be hard pushed to prove to a committed sceptic. Rather it is that with the exception of strands like the Pure Land Shin traditions, faith has not been a determining factor in establishing traditional Buddhist identity , Even here, as Galen Amstutz has noted, the representation of Shin in terms of Protestant notions of faith is far from unproblematic.⁷

Similarly, in the diverse traditions captured by the classification 'Hindu', there are rough correlates with Christian devotionalism and monotheism in the form of the various bhakti movements (particularly some strands of Srivaishnavism) but this is hardly representative of the history and variety of Hindu traditions. Here again we do not often find the same stress upon orthodoxy and 'right belief' as a determining factor of one's allegiance or group-identity. Moreover, whose bhakti are we talking about — the contemplative devotion to Kṛṣṇa advocated in the Bhagavad Gita, the later medieval bhakti movements or contemporary trends focusing upon the historicity of Rama and promoting Hinduness (Hindutva).

The notion of Buddhism as a system of beliefs was introduced into modern Sinhalese consciousness through the activities of figures such as Col. Henry Olcott, one of the founding members of the Theosophical Society.⁸ In establishing the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka, Olcott expressed his commitment to his new faith by publicly taking the three refuges and publishing in 1881 a Buddhist Catechism, modelled as he said, upon the elementary handbooks so effectively used among the Western Christian sects (cited in Lopez, 1998: 29). Olcott's colonially-inspired desire to restore 'true Buddhism' to a population that in his view was woefully unaware of its basic tenets, was a counter-move to the activities of Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka at the time. Olcott's approach however replicated basic Christian theological assumptions about the nature of religion just as much as it reproduced the colonial paternalism which prevented a recognition of indigenous Sinhalese agency. As Donald Lopez notes in his discussion of this,

Belief appears as a universalist category because of the universalist claims of the tradition in which it became most central, Christianity. Other religions have made universalist claims, but Christianity was allied with political power, which made it possible to transport its belief to all corners of the globe, ... Belief, then, or perhaps the demand that there be belief, is implicated both in the activities of Christian missionaries and in the native efforts ... to counter them. The question that remains, however, is what the Sinhalese gave up by giving credit to belief. (Lopez, 1998: Belief in M. Taylor, Critical Terms in Religious Studies : 33)

I would suggest that one of the things that was lost in the 19th century representation of 'Buddhism' as a system of religious beliefs was a full recognition of Buddhist forms of life as realistic alternatives to western secular models of what it is to be modern. In the act of its discovery as a faith, 'Buddhism' ceased to represent a long-standing civilization and became instead a religion.⁹ Moreover, by representing Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as 'faiths' or 'belief-systems', the role of faith in modern (so-called) secular and Capitalistic forms of life is occluded. Through this process the secular is privileged as the objective common ground upon which the various religions or faiths meet, rather than as one of a number of divergent cultural models of what it is to be 'modern'. In this sense the creation of inter-faith dialogue has led to a kind of enclavism, where the wider secular spheres of politics, philosophy, science and economics are safely insulated from the need to engage with the perspectives of the great civilizations that many of these modern religions represent. As Anouar Majid (*Unveiling Traditions*, 2000, p. 29) and William Hart (2000, *Edward Said and The Religious Effects of Culture*) have recently noted in different contexts, the Orientalist paradigm continues to be replicated for as long as one of its central presuppositions is left uninterrogated — namely the postulation of a rigid dichotomy between the secular and the religious and the privileging of the former as constitutive of the real world out there .

The location of the religious within the private sphere of belief, often highlighted as a key consequence of the European Enlightenment, has not gone uncontested.¹⁰ Indeed, since the nineteenth century, and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s,¹¹ the category of religion has provided the *main site for the framing and articulation of alternatives to Euro-American models of modernity*. Such movements and modes of cultural resistance are translated, as Derrida has recently suggested, into a *Latinized* frame of reference when they are represented in mainstream western culture, or as Derrida himself puts it: the world today speaks Latin (most often via Anglo-American) when it authorizes itself in the *name of religion*. (*Acts of Religion*, 2002, p. 64). The process whereby expressions of cultural difference become translated as religion in the western imagination is thus labelled by Derrida MONDIALATINISATION, or if you prefer in Anglo-American — *globalatinisation*.¹²

Religion and the Social Imaginary

The notion that the concept of religion is an imagined category has been explored by the Chicago historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith makes the following statement at the beginning of his work, *Imagining Religion* (1982):

If we have understood the archaeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. . . . *Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study.* It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. *Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.* For this reason, the student of religion, . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (my italics, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. xi.)

I must admit to being uncomfortable with one reading of Smith's suggestion - which is that religion is a category located specifically in the imaginative mind of the scholar. Religion is a **socially** constructed category. It is a constitutive element of the **social**, political and economic world in which we live. To imply that the notion of religion exists only in the mind of an individual is to fall into the Cartesian trap of dividing the world up into empirically real facts on the one hand and an individually observing mind on the other. This ignores the role that social and cultural conditioning play in the manifestation of both and the inscribing of the discourse of religion on the body itself, in the form disciplinary practices and what Foucault calls governmentality. In other words, religion is not just in one's mind (if one wishes to continue to put it that way) but also exists as a structural and embodied feature of the way in which western society has divided up the world. Such categories are imagined or constructed - they have particular discursive histories that we can plot, but we, as individual agents, do not imagine these categories in isolation from the wider social, political and linguistic structures through which we make sense of reality.

Religion then exists not only in the scholar's imagination but also in the collective imagination of the wider community. Contemporary scholars of religion do not dream up this category, they inherit it and build upon it. Rather, like the Yogaacara Buddhist, I want to stress that imagined constructions (what the *Madhyaanta Vibhaaga* calls *abhuuta-parikalpa* - the imagination of the unreal), do in fact exist in the sense that they produce effects and structure our perception of the world. Now to be fair to Professor Smith, I do not think that he would necessarily wish to deny the point that I am making (indeed on the very next page he appeals to the role played by Judaism in our collective invention of western civilization, p. xii). Nevertheless, to distil the category down to the level of individual agency is precisely to ignore its power. It is part of our social imaginary and structures our social reality.

One of the interesting issues that arise here is not so much whether or not western notions of religion are accurate but rather a matter of documenting the historical process whereby such notions became self-evident even to those for whom they were an innovation. The classification of certain cultural phenomena as religious and its separation from a sphere known as the secular may well seem obvious to some, but it was not common sense at all to non-Europeans before the advent of colonialism.

However, attention to colonialism and that complex series of process labelled globalization causes us to realize that although map is not territory, the conceptual force (literally: *force*) of terms such as religion has meant that they have functioned not simply as descriptive taxonomies of cultural terrain, they have also led to *mondialatinisation*. In other words religion and the related group of concepts and orientations that cluster around it have for some time now functioned as prescriptive models or blueprints that have transformed the terrain itself.¹³ Maps may not be territory, but through colonialism, European cognitive maps have reconfigured the very territory that they are purported to be a representation of. This is no more apparent than in the tendency in both colonial narratives and indigenous South Asian responses, to locate authentic religiosity within the sacred texts of a tradition and in the interpretation of prescriptive statements within those texts as descriptive accounts of historical truth. This led to a widespread criticism of contemporary practices and a reformist spirit in both the colonizer and the colonized, grounded in both cases in an idealized nostalgia for lost origins. To investigate

this requires that we pay attention to the role that European colonialism has played in the re-configuration of South Asian identities, as well as the multiple and complex agendas present and the politics of representation that they manifest. This also requires paying attention to what Talal Asad has called, the inequality of languages — namely the asymmetrical power relations present in the translation of concepts between non-equivalent languages (see Asad, 1993: 190; King, 1999, *Indian Philosophy*: 237-8)

The Discourse of Religion in the Study of South Asia

What has been the consequences of taking the European cartographic imagination too seriously — of using the map of religion to explain and classify the intellectual and cultural traditions of Asia?

It is likely that some of the key cultural fault-lines and traditional modes of identity-construction and differentiation will be overlooked if only because they will be written over by an emphasis upon distinguishing features of the terrain that have been significant in a western context. This is no more obvious than in the exclusion of Asian intellectual thought from the history of philosophy. In the case of Indic traditions, this has usually been on the grounds that Indian philosophy is deemed too religious or tradition-bound to be philosophy in the purest (read: modern / western / secular) sense. The contribution of Islamic thinkers to the history of philosophy for instance is often relegated to the role of medieval postal workers, safely delivering classical Greek philosophy to the medieval Europeans. As long as we continue to see Islam for instance as a 'religion' in the modern post-Enlightenment sense of a 'faith', we will fail to understand the significance of contemporary trends such as 'Islamic science', 'Islamic economics' and crucially in today's world, Islamic politics. These simply cannot be adequately rendered in terms of the highly policed boundary between the secular and the religious that dominates western descriptions of reality. The sense in which Islam represents community, civilizational and political dimensions are lost if we focus upon it narrowly as a 'faith'.

The real challenge then is to question the terms of the debate - that is a map which draws a rigid boundary between the secular and the religious dimensions of human existence and the effect that this has upon the classification and interpretation of non-western intellectual

traditions. It is this separation which maintains the marginality of non-western perspectives and worldviews within the terms set by modern western liberalism. In so doing their importance as the major site for the articulation of difference and resistance to *globalatinisation* becomes severely curtailed. In the translation of ancient non-western traditions and civilizations into religions in the modern post-Enlightenment sense of the term, their significance as resources for the expression of 'difference' from dominant western models of modernity becomes severely curtailed. The distillation of the religious dimension of culture from other spheres of human activity causes such traditions to be cognitively and structurally segregated from the realms of politics, economics, science and philosophy. This privileges modern western ideologies and forms of life (such as economic neo-liberalism, triumphalist secularism, scientific rationalism and materialism) and insulates them from an open-ended engagement with the varieties of human attempts to articulate the nature of reality.

Moreover, the projection of anachronistic and highly reified notions of Hinduism and Buddhism onto South Asian history has also caused scholars to miss important points of interconnection and contestation in the history of Indian thought. This has been reinforced by the tendency for scholars to specialize in one or the other but rarely both. As a consequence the complex interplay between brahmanical and Buddhist traditions in India is often radically underplayed. Moreover, the Buddhistic heritage of Indian civilization is radically underplayed.

Despite the relatively recent rise of the discourse of 'Hindutva' and exclusivist Hindu movements, the dynamic and fluid nature of South Asian traditions remains to this day with Hindus, Buddhist, Jainas and Muslims interacting on a number of different levels. Such interactions are of course complex and shift according to local context and history but they are rarely well captured by the search for what might be called the religious dimension. As Talal Asad has argued, the search for an essence of religion encourages us to abstract the religious from a wider cultural and political dynamic. *It points us away from culture and power rather than towards an appreciation of their mutual imbrication.* The work of scholars such as Richard Gombrich, Steve Collins and Joanna Jurewicz increasingly demonstrate that we miss key features and allusions within early Buddhist thought and imagery if we ignore the social and ideological struggles being played out in the texts, particularly in terms of relations with the

mainstream Vedic and Brahmanical traditions of the time.¹⁴ Similarly, one cannot understand the specific form that early Advaita Vedaanta took or the orientation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras if we ignore their interaction with prevailing Buddhist traditions. In the study of Indian philosophy for instance, there has often been a tendency to elide Indian with Hindu and to represent the various *darsanas* as if they were homogeneous and self-contained systems of thought. This occludes the history of interactions between the various Brahmanical and Sramanic traditions which have clearly been crucial to their historical formation and the development of the various *darsanas*.¹⁵

In a contemporary context, I have attempted to highlight in *Orientalism and Religion*, the ongoing replication of Orientalist presuppositions about India in both the Neo-Vedantic inclusivism of Vivekananda and also in contemporary discourses of Hindutva. In both cases appeal is made to a reified entity known as Hinduism and the history of South Asian philosophy and culture is mapped according to key features of the European cartographic imagination — most notably, the notions of world religions, the mystic or spiritual East and the search for a centralising motif or theology of relevance to all Hindus. Again, as a number of scholars have noted, Dharmapala's Buddhist modernism reproduces a number of key 'Protestant' features, notably the notion of recovering 'pure' Buddhism from its 'decadent' and superstitious village forms, in the emphasis placed upon scripture as the locus of real Buddhism, in the claim that Buddhism is compatible with modern science, and that it is significantly different from other traditions in its non-theistic and non-ritualistic emphases. Robert Sharf's work on D. T. Suzuki and the construction of Zen nationalism during the Meiji period is another case in point.

Again, as Peter Gottschalk has argued (in his study of village life in Arampur, Bihar), there are multiple factors involved in identity-formation that cut across a simple division of people in terms of an overdetermined 'Hindu or Muslim identity'.¹⁶ These factors, related to gender, economics, caste, region and familial relations, sometimes complement and sometimes cut across each other, making the question of identity and representation a complex affair. As Gottschalk himself notes, "Western scholars of the Subcontinent rely too heavily on *Hindu* and *Muslim* as descriptive adjectives and analytic categories". The result has been that scholarly accounts, following the trajectory established by James Mill's History of British India (1817), tend to

bifurcate India into two halves - *Hindu* and *Muslim*. (p. 3). While western colonialists and Orientalists did not create these divisions *ex nihilo* they certainly highlighted, inscribed and authorized them through the Census, education and the strategy of divide and rule. As Peter van der Veer has noted (1993: 39), it is not so much that Orientalism is the cause of communalism but rather that orientalism and indian nationalism both belong to the discourse of modernity. Indian nationalism in its very anticolonialism shares basic discursive premises with orientalism and with the nationalism of the colonizing British. The continuing presence of key Orientalist tropes in contemporary Hindu discourses of varying types is a good example of this ongoing legacy.

Conclusions: Should We Throw the Map of Religion Away?

The discourse of Religion structures and orders human knowledge and of course provides some semblance of unity for the academic discipline of Religious Studies. It also becomes inscribed in institutions and political structures that have then become resistant to its interrogation. Should we then, as Tim Fitzgerald (2000) has recently proposed, simply throw the map away? Realizing that religion is a mapping term, and the role played by European imperialism in universalizing this category in the modern world, allows us to see both the problems and the ongoing significance of the term. To ask how many religions there are in the world is to confuse map with territory. Similarly, to ask whether religion is a false category is in my view a badly formed question. Far more interesting is the question of the usefulness of the map and the effects of its deployment? Does the map cause us to miss interesting features of South Asian history and culture simply because they are not features of the map we are using?

Note that here I am explicitly resisting the tendency of the modern consciousness to equate the imaginary with the false. In that sense I am trying to reconnect with a more positive or perhaps constructive (in both senses of the term) understanding of the imagination in a manner that is consonant with pre-Enlightenment conceptions of it, that is before the imaginary became seen as the false by the lenses of secular modernity. To see what is imagined or constructed as the false is to fall into a trap set by post-Enlightenment thought, where the Cartesian dichotomy between mental and material existence is bolstered by an association of the real with the empirical and the material, as opposed to the imagined which is located in the mind of a human and therefore constitutes something that does not really exist out there. Since the Enlightenment, imagination has often been as the faculty of imagining what is not there (re-phrase) but before secularization in medieval Europe the faculty of the imagination was not seen as denoting the construction of the false but as a faculty of perception. Similarly in a South Asian context, - we should note the

example of the Buddhist notion of *manas* as a sensory apparatus — that which apprehends ideas. When something is imagined — particularly at the social or conventional level - this does not make it false (a point well noted by those Indic philosophical traditions that promulgated a notion of two truths (*dvaya-satya*). We should avoid treating the socially constructed as if it is unreal. It has effects.

Again, inverting the colonial move, might new light be thrown on features of western culture if we examined them afresh in terms of the cartographic imagination of other cultures? What was lost for instance in the decision to translate terms like *aagama* , *saasana* , *sampradaaya* and *dharma* into religion in South Asian contexts? What might be gained from reversing the translation process and mapping western culture and history in terms of Indic categories? If we see the European Enlightenment as a loosely bound social and intellectual trend of the 17th / 18th century, originating in Northern Europe but then increasingly universalized in the 19th and 20th centuries through European colonial expansion, can we not usefully compare it in macro-historical terms to say Brahmanism in Northern India some one thousand years earlier? Bearing in mind that both the European Enlightenment and Brahmanism are heterogeneous cultural systems, we can see the way in which they functioned as ideological and social backdrop to the dominant trends in their respective societies at the time. Are there not loosely defined *sampradaayas* and *aagamas* in the European Enlightenment traditions that provide the basis for our own modern academic lineages? Modern western academics belong to their own *sampradaayas* and accept their own forms of authoritative testimony, even if this is often effaced by the emphasis that is placed upon intellectual innovation and individual scholarship. Framed in this way European Enlightenment values, traditions and forms of life do not seem nearly so different *in nature* from the so-called religious traditions of Asia.

What I have in mind here is an approach to comparative analysis that is prepared to transgress the highly policed boundary between the secular and the religious, between the traditional and the modern, between the Western and the Asian. Why not compare singing hail to the Chief to a Vedic hymn praising Indra? or deity-veneration to celebrity adoration, or the Capitalist ideology of market forces to the Brahmanical ideology of *samsaara*? All of these comparisons would bring out interesting similarities and differences but they all involve re-thinking, unravelling and transgressing the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, which *in its very sacredness in the modern western consciousness privileges certain forms of life*

over others and sometimes even prevents certain questions from being asked or considered.

There are many interesting scholarly works that already explore cross-cultural themes, myths and rituals in interesting and innovative places. Akhil Gupta's refreshing comparison of the reincarnation of souls and the rebirth of commodities is a good example of this kind of work.¹⁷ Few studies however, follow Gupta in directly challenging the construction of binary oppositions that make such comparisons appear unusual, often delightful but always framed as exceptions to the rule.

Similarly, there is a need to interrogate the historical processes whereby central features of the western cartographical imagination become normative elements in the cultural terrain way beyond their original purview. David Scott's recent work on Sri Lanka, for instance, highlights the role of the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms of the 1830s in re-structuring indigenous subjectivities and institutions, thereby creating an Anglicized middle-class elite in Sri Lanka and providing the conditions for the emergence of new reform-oriented trends such as Dharmapala's modernist Buddhism. As Scott notes,

Concepts like religion, state, and identity, are treated ahistorically insofar as they are made to refer to a set of timeless social-ideological formations as defining (or as *defining in the same way*) for say third-century inhabitants of the island as for contemporary Sinhalese. This conceptual / ideological projection of the present into the past (as a hermeneutic of the present) is possible only because these categories — religion, state, and so on — are the authoritative and normalized categories through which Universal History has been written, and through which the local histories of the colonial and postcolonial worlds have been constituted as so many variations on a common theme about the progressive making of modernity.¹⁸

Should we Throw the Map of Religion Away?

However, such strategic inversions and transgressions aside, I must disagree with Tim Fitzgerald's call to abandon the term religion altogether, a position that he too seems to be revising.¹⁹ Not using the term will not erase the culturally embedded associations that derive from it, nor the related constellation of concepts and orientations that cluster around it. Now

there are some similarities between Fitzgerald's position and mine. We both advocate an exploration of the interface between religious and cultural studies for instance. In both cases this is motivated by a concern to **re-place** religion in culture and history and also to disentangle the study of Asian traditions from the theological categories of western Christianity. In his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Fitzgerald however calls for a complete revisioning of Religious studies as a *form* of cultural studies (more specifically the study of institutions, institutional values and the legitimation of power, *ibid.*, p.10) and an abandoning of the term religion altogether. I am less convinced that this is the best or even the most realistic way forward. The idea that there are religions out there in the real world is such an embedded part of our social imaginary that it seems premature to talk of abandoning the notion altogether.²⁰ Moreover, a rapprochement between religious and cultural studies is one thing, but the subsuming of the former under the latter is quite another. This it seems to me runs the risk of domesticating our scholarship according to the overwhelmingly Eurocentric and secularist lenses of mainstream social science. For some this may be seen as a good thing (e.g. Wiebe, McCutcheon and Fitzgerald). Donald Wiebe for instance has argued for some time now that the failure of nerve in Religious Studies has been its refusal to renounce theology and embrace its identity as a social science. However, in calling for an abandonment of what they see as theologizing in the study of religions, scholars such as McCutcheon and Fitzgerald do not appear to have realized that challenging the *sui generis* nature of religion also creates a space for a postcolonial critique of the privileging of the secular. Such dichotomies, as any student of Naagaarjuna would note, are mutually dependent constructions. To resist the interrogation of the secular as well as the religious is not to abandon the map, but rather to tear it in half and use what is left. Such an approach is in danger of promoting a reductionist sociology,²¹ that is just as problematic as the hidden theologizing that Fitzgerald, McCutcheon and Wiebe, see at work in the comparative study of religion.

There is a need then to be more *strategic* and sensitive to the diverse contexts in which the map of religion is being used. What worries me about Fitzgerald's suggestion is what might be lost or silenced in this process of discarding the map. Map is not territory and similarly baby is not bathwater! Abandoning the term (rather than its suspension and the interrogation of its translation in specific contexts) stops the debate just when it is getting interesting. Indeed as

African scholar Isabel Phiri noted at the recent IAHR conference in Durban - it is primarily western scholars living in the Northern hemisphere who are advocating abandoning the term religion. In parts of contemporary Africa, she argues, the term may have an important function to perform as a tool for highlighting oppressive regimes and exclusionary practices.²² To throw the map away is to fetishize the difference between cultures at the expense of paying attention to possible parallels and / or useful comparisons that might be made. As Uma Narayan has argued, what is required is a concerted resistance to all forms of cultural essentialism, *including* relativisms that privilege difference over similitude:

"This critique of cultural essentialism would reject the idea that there is anything that can solidly and uncontroversially be defined as "Indian culture" or "African culture" or "Western culture" for that matter. It would proceed by challenging a "picture of the world" that some versions of cultural relativism assume to be true: that *there are neat packages called "Different cultures" each of which is internally consistent and monolithic, and which disagrees only with "Other cultures."*²³

Such anti-essentialist approaches acknowledge commonalities and differences between and *within* traditions and can also allow a space for a critique of the politics of representation involved in the homogenization of traditions.

Because discourses are neither homogeneous nor unidirectional it is possible to enter the discourse of religions precisely as a means of contesting, reinterpreting and reading its very common-sense —ness against the grain.²⁴ One might consider for instance applying the map of religion to an analysis of Capitalist forms of life, secular rationalism, neo-liberal ideology, nationalism, and scientism etc as a means of challenging its normative effects and assumptions. The project I am suggesting requires an approach to categories such as religion and mysticism that is more strategic and context-sensitive than either unreflective usage on the one hand, or simple abandonment of the map on the other, would allow. ***It involves paying attention to what I would call the politics of macro-translation — that is the way in which entire world-views, traditions and forms of life have become translated through the universalizing discourse of***

religion . This involves challenging the routinization of the notion of religion as a category through which Universal History has been written.

The category of Religion has also provided a point of orientation and a putative unity for an academic discipline known as the study / history of religions. What then is the future for the discipline of the comparative study of religion in this context? As Hans Kippenberg has recently argued, the emergence of this discipline in Europe was intrinsically bound up with processes of modernization and diverse attempts to theorize modernity.²⁵ Much of the important scholarship in the history of the study of religion has been bound up, as Kippenberg argues, with contesting and defending different models of modernity by way of a comparative analysis of the other (whether conceived as the Orient, the primitive, or the non-western etc). However, rather than undermining this kind of work, *challenging the religionization of non-western cultures* highlights precisely the ongoing significance of work carried out by scholars within this field of study. In continuing the intellectual legacy of interrogating and challenging dominant models of what it is to be human and modern, there is an important and ongoing role for Religious Studies in a postcolonial era — acting as a kind of foreign body within the university — a site for both the *specialized* and *comparative* study of cultures, a place for the articulation of cultural difference and the exercise of sensitive comparisons, and a space where the Eurocentric, theological and secular presuppositions of the Academy can be thoroughly interrogated and debated.²⁶ There is no other obvious space for this kind of interdisciplinary activity to take place within the western Academy as it is currently configured; nowhere else where the traditions and insights of the diverse philosophies and civilizations of human history can be explored in a comparative, critical and dialogical context.

Endnotes

¹ See Andre Gunder Frank (1998), *Re-ORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press). Frank argues that it is only Eurocentrism that causes us to see Europe as the focal point of world history. Directly challenging the received historiographical accounts provided by Marx, Weber, Polanyi, Braudel and Wallerstein, Frank argues that the rise of the West from 1400 onwards coincided with a period of partial decline in Asia, and is tied, amongst other things, to the economic benefits gained by European expansionism. At the end of the 21st century, he suggests we are seeing the re-emergence of Asia and a return to the Asia-centered history that preceded more recent history. For further discussion of the Eurocentric prejudices contained in mainstream accounts of world history (or even within the very nature of History itself, see J. M. Blaut (2000), *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (The Guilford press, New York) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press).

² In *Orientalism and Religion* I argued that the category of 'religion' is the product of a culturally specific discursive history characterized by the imprints that Christian theology, the Enlightenment and secular modernity have left upon it. As such its continued unreflective use cross-culturally, whilst opening up interesting debates and interactions over the past few centuries (and creating something called inter-faith dialogue and the world religions) has also closed down avenues of exploration and other potential cultural and intellectual interactions.

³ Smith outlines the various shifts in the usage of the category of 'religio' in the West from pre-Christian Rome to the present day. For a discussion of the significance of this shift see King, 1999: chapter 2. Smith notes that in medieval Europe, the term was generally used by the Catholic tradition in the sense of the religious life, that is the life of monastic vows. The various *religiones* denoted the various monastic orders. However, it is with the Protestant Reformation that we find 'religion' being used to denote faith or piety. This led the way for the 17th and 18th century uses of the term 'religion' to denote a system of beliefs and the emphasis that theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto made upon religious as essentially about experience or a creaturely feeling. In the late 19th and 20th centuries we find the birth of a new goal - that of discerning the essence of Religion and the religions. As Smith noted, This is to carry the process of reification to its logical extreme: endowing the concepts that an earlier generation has constructed ... with a final and inherent validity, a cosmic legitimacy. (1961, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 47-8). Smith's overview of the history of the term in the West constitutes a single chapter of his work (2). For more detailed analyses see Michel Despland (1979), *La Religion en Occident: Evolution des idées et du vécu* (Héritage et projet, 23, Montreal: Fides) and Ernst Feil (1986), *Religio: die geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation* (Forschung zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte, 36, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht). See also Michel Despland and Gérard Vallee (eds., 1992), *Religion in History. the Word, the Idea, the Reality* (Wilfred Laurier University Press).

⁴ See Steven Wasserstrom (1999), *Religion After Religion*, Princeton Univ Press, p.240: The dominance of mysticism in the History of Religions, more generally, remains regnant (not only genealogically) throughout the study of religion.

⁵ For a critique of the tendency to conceive of Buddhism as peculiarly concerned with the cultivation of mystical experiences and therefore as an archetypally mystical religion see Robert Sharf, *Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience*, in *Numen* 42.3, 1995, pp.228-283. Robert Sharf for instance questions, the tendency to approach the compendious Buddhist marga treatises (texts delineating the stages on the Buddhist path) as if they presented a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of seasoned meditators. . . (p. 232). Rather, he argues, traditional references to meditation or mental development (bhavana) should be seen not in terms of the cultivation of extraordinary and private states of consciousness, but as primarily liturgical and propaedeutical in orientation. Such practice consisted largely of the recitation of Pali texts pertaining to meditation . . . chanting verses enumerating the qualities of the Buddha, reciting formulaic lists of the thirty-two parts of the body, and so on. (p. 242). Moreover, in the modern period the rhetoric of experience functions as an empty category in which a variety of Buddhist ideological positions can be placed and Buddhism as a spiritual phenomenon can be assigned a trans-cultural, trans-historical reality. Such privatization of Buddhism allows for the construction of an idealized and ahistorical world religion amenable to both perennialist and secular interpretations and successfully divorce the traditional Buddhist meditative practices from the ethical, doctrinal, liturgical and socio-political context in which they occurred.

⁶ See Abhidharmahridaya, pp. 129-31 for the distinction between a *sraddhaanusaarin* and the *dharmaanusaarin*. See also Bodhisattva-Pitaka ch. 11, in U. Pagel (1995), *The Bodhisattva-Pitaka*, esp. p. 371. The Buddhist tradition lists the five faculties as *sraddhaa* — faith; energy (*viirya*), mindfulness (*smṛiti*), concentration (*samaadhi*) and insight (*prajnaa*). Although often ranked hierarchically by the tradition, Gombrich has suggested that the commentarial distinction between a follower of the Dhamma (*dhammaanusaarii*) and a follower through

sraddhaa (saddhaanusaarii) may not be present in the Paali Suttas themselves (see *How Buddhism Began*, Jordan lectures).

⁷ See Galen Amstutz (1997) *Interpreting Amida. History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism*, p. 86-7; 180n; 181n.

⁸ For a useful discussion of this see Donald Lopez's article on 'Belief' in Mark Taylor's collection, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*.

⁹ As H. L. Seneviratne suggests in his recent critique of modernist Buddhism in Sri Lanka, 'The label Buddhism itself symbolized this process of fixing, cleansing, and establishing boundaries, for Buddhism had no such indigenous label, and existed only as a total social phenomenon of pluralistic and unbounded beliefs and practices, a system with an open boundary that allowed free movement of belief and practice between the total system's center and periphery.' (Seneviratne, 1999, *The Work of Kings. The New Buddhism of Sri Lanka*, Chicago University Press, p. 3)

¹⁰ As Talal Asad (1993) has argued in *Genealogies of Religion* (John Hopkins University Press) the modern western tendency to conceive of religion in terms of belief - located in the private state of mind of a believer, has led westerners to think of religion as something that is essentially private and therefore *wholly* separate from the public realm of politics. Indeed for Asad all attempts to find a universal definition or essence of religion are to be avoided because they imply that religion is somehow able to operate in isolation from other spheres of human cultural activity such as politics, law and science (1993: 28). The privatization of the religious, characterized by the emphasis upon the world faiths simultaneously insulates such traditions from wider public criticism but it also ghetto-izes them by marginalizing their significance for debates in the public domain. Moreover, the sheer diversity of human cultures mean that the search for universal definitions of terms like religion is fruitless. In its place Asad advocates an approach to the study of cultures which focuses upon embodied practices and the specific power-relations in which they operate.

¹¹ Indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has become increasingly difficult to express cultural and political alternatives to western liberal Capitalism without such resistance being framed in terms of the post-Enlightenment category of 'the religious'. In the vacuum caused by the collapse of the communist bloc, Marxism itself appears to be going through a period of transition and reconfiguration after the Age of Europe. In this new context it is no surprise to find that it is the culturalist Marxists such as Althusser and particularly Gramsci, who are proving of most interest to postcolonial and third world writers if only because these strands of Marxist thought are better able to accommodate a dialectical space for indigenous intentionalities that are otherwise erased by universalist notions of class and a narrow emphasis upon economic determinism.

¹² See Derrida *Acts of Religion*, p. 45-6; 64/66-7; 42; 50-52; 72.

¹³ Frits Staal notes for instance that 'The inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has not only led to piecemeal errors of labelling, identification and classification, to conceptual confusion and to some name-calling. It is also responsible for something more extraordinary: the creation of so-called religions.' (Frits Staal, *Rules Without Meaning. Rituals, Mantras and the Human Sciences*, New York, Toronto Studies in Religion Vol 4, Peter Lang, 1989, p. 393.).

¹⁴ See Gombrich, *How Buddhism began*; Collins, *Selfless Persons*; Joanna Jurewicz, 'Playing with Fire: the pratityasamutpada from the perspective of Vedic Thought' in *Journal of the Pali Text Society* Vol XXVI, 2000: pp. 77-103)

¹⁵ It is clear, for instance, that the *aastika-naastika* distinction so often pressed into service to reinforce the separation of 'Hindu' and 'Buddhist' traditions is a fluid and changeable mode of classification with shades of meaning and application that shift according to context. The Buddhist philosopher Naagaarjuna, for instance, refers to the Vaisesika school as one of several *naastikas* (non-affirmers) in his work the *Ratnaavalii* I, v. 60-61.

¹⁶ Peter Gottschalk (2001), *Beyond Hindu and Muslim*, Oxford University Press..

¹⁷ Akhil Gupta (1992), 'The Reincarnation of Souls and the Rebirth of Commodities: representations of Time in East and West' in *Cultural Critique* 22: 187-211. Gupta challenges the stereotypical dichotomy between Indian notions of time as cyclic and western notions as linear with reference to the ongoing adoption of cyclic motifs in industrial and post-industrial western societies. This does not lead to a kind of simplistic perennialism (we are all basically the same), nor to a rigid form of cultural apartheid (we are all essentially different), rather it is a recognition that there are multiple registers to consider in comparative study and that a rigid separation of religious/secular, traditional/modern, pre-industrial/industrial, west/east causes us to miss opportunities to understand ourselves and others better. Such an approach however must take into account the multiple axes of

domination — gender, sexuality, race, class, colonialism etc and a recognition of differences both *between* and *within* the cultural phenomena under investigation.

¹⁸ David Scott (2000), *Toleration and Historical Traditions of Difference* in *Subaltern Studies XI*: pp. 288-9.

¹⁹ Personal communication with the author.

²⁰ Fitzgerald notes this himself when he states that the category of religion is now deeply embedded in a legitimation process within western societies, in the dominant relation of those societies with non-western societies, or with ethnic minorities living within western societies. (Ibid., p. 19).

²¹ Talal Asad describes sociologism as the view according to which religious ideologies are said to get their real meaning from the political or economic structure, and the self-confirming methodology according to which this reductive semantic principle is evident to the authoritative anthropologist and not to the people being written about (Asad, 1993: 198-9).

²² Response to David Chidester's keynote address: *History of Religions, Durban 2000: Identity, Location, Media, Method and Education*. IAHR, Durban, 2000.

²³ Uma Narayan, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," in Uma Narayana and Sandra Harding (2000, *Decentering the Center. Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World*, Indiana University Press, p.96.

²⁴ One way to do this is to challenge the tendency to locate enter the terrain of the discourse of religion is by exploring the tension between the Enlightenment tradition of locating religion in a privatized sphere of experience, belief and spirituality on the one hand (Kant, Schleiermacher, James, Otto) and a more communitarian strand within the Enlightenment (probably best exemplified by figures like Robertson Smith, Mauss and Durkheim) which locates the significance of the religious in the articulation of the values and perspectives of communities, societies and cumulative traditions. The tension between these two Enlightenment strands can be seen for instance in WC Smith choice of faith and cumulative tradition as dual alternatives to the category of religion, thereby acknowledging both strands in his account

²⁵ Hans Kippenberg, 1997, *Entdeckung Der Religionsgeschichte / Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, 2002, Princeton.

²⁶ This can be done by drawing attention to the parochial or provincial nature of European and / or western paradigms of knowledge, as well as to the ethnocentricity of some of its practices and theories. Such a project can be approached of course from a number of different disciplinary angles. My own particular interest tends to be what might be called philosophy or the history of ideas, but this work is or could also be done by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, geographers, cultural studies specialists etc.