

# How not to become a founding figure



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The views recently put forward by Fukuyama and Huntington showed that the academic world may once again be ready to think in large patterns of the rise and fall of civilisations. However, long before that, the Buddhologist Trevor Ling put forward a theoretical position regarding the rise and fall of civilisations and the vestigial survival of dead civilisations as 'religions'. More recently, Naomi Goldenberg put forward a superficially similar, but, on deeper inspection, quite a different point of view on the power relationship between state institutions and the 'vestigial states' that contest the state's monopoly on power and are known to us as religions. This article explored the differences and possible synergies between these two standpoints.

**Contribution:** This article pleads for much attention to be paid to less well-known theories of religion and demonstrates with reference to the theories of Trevor Ling and Naomi Goldenberg how a virtual conversation between older and more contemporary theorists can open up new theoretical and methodological avenues for understanding religion.

**Keywords:** Trevor Ling; Naomi Goldenberg; religion; civilisation; vestigial state.

## How not to become a founding figure

My colleagues' contributions in this special collection have focused on theorists who may fairly be called the founders of Religious Studies. A century after they were active, we are still talking about Durkheim and Van der Leeuw and no doubt we will still do so a century from now. Other theorists, who had the (mis)fortune to be born later, can be seen as 're-founders'. Someone like Frantz Fanon has opened up new avenues of thought and new ways for us to think about religion.

Religious Studies has never been parochial in its choice of founders. We have accepted inputs from Anthropology, Sociology, Theology, History and so on. The very first thing a student in Religious Studies at the University of South Africa sees in their curriculum are two definitions of religion: one from Durkheim, an anthropologist, and the other from Otto, a theologian (Strijdom 2019). It is in the tension between their respective definitions that we try to create an understanding of what it means to study religion.

In this brief contribution, however, I suggest that we withdraw from that project temporarily and consider the liminal, the obscure, the roads never travelled. There have been other thinkers, arguably equally profound, whose ideas about religion somehow never elevated them to founder status.

This is hardly unique to Religious Studies. Carl Jung's ideas have permeated Western culture to such an extent that terms such as archetype, anima and shadow hardly need explanation. We cite Jung every time a man declares that he is 'exploring his feminine side'. His thought is shown to have influenced the work of major artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (Sedivi 2009). We find Jungian ideas everywhere, except in the formal academic discipline of Psychology, where even Freud is accorded more respect (St. Hilaire 2019):

It is undeniable that some of what Jung brought to the table in terms of psychology is still practiced in today's modern psychology circles, but much of his work was thought to be more mystical and unreliable. Shaped with inconsistencies and contradictions, Jung has been placed on the back burner of psychology, while others such as Freud have been constantly revisited ... Because Jung made large leaps [from] observations to theory much of his hypothesis must be taken on a level of faith, instead of the logical side of scientific discovery. (p. 5)

Another example is Joseph Campbell, whose influence on popular culture and the creative arts has been far greater than in the academic study of literature. Campbell's ideas were most famously used in the creation of the Star Wars films (Seastrom 2015) and still remain the most obvious tool to analyse them (Başarıcı & Kılıçaslan 2017). Elsewhere, we see them used to analyse Led Zeppelin's

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'Stairway to Heaven' (Polyphonic 2019). Campbell has become a fairly common theoretical resource for graduate students (e.g. Kesti 2007; Khanafi 2016; Kirkendall 2015; Levin 2016; Thigpen 2017) and he still features occasionally in research articles (e.g. Allen 2019; Bray 2018; Morong 1994), but increasingly we are seeing Campbellian analyses in disciplines far removed from literary analysis. In that academic world, McDaniel (McDaniel 2020) can confidently assert that 'The hero's journey is nonsense' (cf. Elsensohn 2006).

Both Jung and Campbell, in fact, have advanced ideas that might be put into far greater use in Religious Studies than they have been so far. For both, we would have to take their claims of universal applicability with a grain of salt, but do we have a problem doing that with, say, Durkheim? But let us move on to something even more obscure: The bleak vision of Trevor Ling and its reincarnation in the thought of Naomi Goldenberg.

The world is seeing a new interest in the construction of mega-narratives about history and our place in it. One might have thought that such concerns had disappeared with the death of Oswald Spengler, but the world of thought is often cyclical, and the appearance of Fukuyama's (1992) book 'The End of History and the Last Man' signalled that the world was once again ready to think in big patterns. When this was followed by Huntington's article (1993) and then book (Huntington 2011) on the 'Clash of civilisations', widely seen as a refutation of Fukuyama, it really did look as if cultural historians were again prepared to look up from their preoccupation with small-scale studies and speak expansively across the centuries. Sadly, events since then have shown Huntington's apocalyptic vision to be more prophetic than Fukuyama's sunny optimism.

However, two decades before Fukuyama and Huntington put forward their different and very differently influential, views of the mega-patterns of history, the Buddhologist Trevor Ling (1920–1995, viz. the obituary by Willmer 1995), in the introduction to his book 'The Buddha' (Ling 1973), presented a view of religion and civilisation that can potentially be used as an explanatory framework for the current state of the world and the place of religions in it. In this, he anticipated contemporary positions on 'religion' as an essentially modern concept (e.g. Nongbri 2013).

Sadly, Ling never pursued this train of thought further. We find no trace of it, for example, in his later book 'Buddhism, Imperialism and War' (Ling 1979). Whilst both Fukuyama and Huntington found themselves in a post-Cold War intellectual climate in which they could expand their ideas from an article to a book, Ling was unable or unwilling to do so. The early 1970s did not present the right environment for expansive thinking on the past and future of civilisation. Ling's thought on this issue therefore never became the cause célèbre that Fukuyama and Huntington's respective theories became two decades later. Yet, it is an intriguing perspective on the course of history and the one that deserves much

attention than it has received thus far. As we shall see, certain contemporary events make perfect sense when viewed from a Lingian perspective. Others, of course, do not.

According to Ling (Ling 1973:24–34), what we now call a 'religion' is the much atrophied and fossilised remnant of what was once a living, thriving civilisation. Once there was a Christian Civilisation. The people who lived in it were barely aware of 'belonging' to a 'religion' called 'Christianity'. A few intellectuals might have used such terms, which fool us today into thinking that there was a universal understanding of their meaning to parallel our own. But such was not the case. Similarly, there was a Muslim civilisation in which being a Muslim was simply part of normal, everyday life and so on for the Hindu, Buddhist and Confucianist civilisations. This survives, to an extent, in a few places:

It might sound strange, but growing up in Israel makes one' Judaism pretty obvious. You don't need to practice Judaism to know that you are Jewish. You know that you are Jewish because you are not something else. (Gutman 2017)

But even here, the possibility of being 'something else' shows the encroachment of modernity. It is hard for us to imagine even the condition of there being nothing else to be. In spite of that, Ling maintains that this is the position in which the vast majority of human beings have historically found themselves.

Civilisations eventually decline and fall. However, bits and pieces of their heritage do survive the catastrophe and live on in subsequent civilisations. A text here, a cosmogony there. These survivals, forms what we call 'religions'. They are no longer the main branch of society. They are incomplete fossils from a past age. The key to that fossil status is awareness. There was no need for a Medieval European to stand up and say 'I am a Christian' or for a Tenth Century North African to declare 'I am a Muslim'. Those were default conditions in their civilisations, simmering under the threshold of consciousness for all but the intelligentsia (who might expect martyrdom for public evidence of dissent, depending on the strictures of that civilisation). But once there is sufficient separation, a statement like 'I am a Buddhist' or 'I am a Hindu' makes sense, that civilisation is irreparably broken (Ling 1973):

[W]hat are seen today as the 'great religions' – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam – are vestigial remains of civilisations. Mere hummocks of what were once, so to speak, great mountain ranges, they now have a mild charm, standing out a little, as they do, from the flat alluvial expanse of secularism in which they are slowly being silted up. (p. 33)

But as Ling himself goes on to suggest perhaps that metaphor exaggerates the flatness of the terrain. We too live in a specific social and intellectual milieu. We too live in a civilisation. In what civilisation do we live? What is the dominant condition that we take for granted to such a degree that any deviation from it comes across as a conservative backlash? In terms of Ling's analysis, I submit that we live in the civilisation of modernity. This is the dominant discourse that shapes our lives. We do not think of ourselves as 'belonging' to

modernity, but neither did a 10th-century European think of himself as 'belonging' to Christianity. It is what he was. It is what we are.

It is more complex than that, of course. When I speak of Modernity Civilisation, I use it as a shorthand for a civilisation that prizes democracy, human rights, scientific and technical progress, economic growth, and so on. It is, to us, counter-intuitive and counter-cultural even to think that all these things might not be unalloyed blessings. Yet that is exactly what earlier civilisations would have thought and exactly what the 'religious' remnants of those earlier civilisations think today.

The playing field is therefore not level. Modernity is not an equal dialogue partner with the religions. It is not a tool that religions may apply or not apply as they please. It is the all-pervasive *zeitgeist*, so universal as to be unspoken. The spokespersons for the fossilised remnants are like Julian the Apostate, trying in vain to restore a lost civilisation. For a civilisation, once it descends to the status of a mere religion, does not rise again. At least we have no known examples. In Ling's analysis, this is not possible. A new civilisation may build upon the ruins of the old, but that exact civilisation is lost to us. There may one day be a neo-Christendom, or a neo-Caliphate, but it can never duplicate exactly the conditions of the original. These new civilisations, should they ever come into being, will always be 'neo-something'. Fossil remnants of previous civilisations going up against the current *zeitgeist*, against Modernity Civilisation, are therefore always going to lose in the end.

Or will they? One thing the study of religion teaches us is the unlimited capacity of the human spirit for innovation and renewal. One day, Modernity Civilisation too will decline and fall. What will replace it is inconceivable to us today. Some parts of what we now hold dear will persist. In fact, according to this analysis, modernity will one day join Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and all the other civilisational fossils. It will be the next 'religion'.

Ling's theory was never developed further and one wonders how he would have dealt with something like the Baha'i Faith, which has never been the basis for an entire civilisation, but certainly hopes to be that one day. How does Ling explain early Christianity, a persecuted minority hiding in the Roman catacombs? Ling's theory explains certain developments very well and some of those are developments that still concern us today. It explains the current trend of secularisation and it explains how remnants of earlier civilisations persist in the form of powerless 'religions'. Let us admit that it has a certain bleak grandeur to it. However, the history of religions provides us with far too many counterexamples. Ling's theory fails to explain too many phenomena that we regard as 'religious'.

That is where it would have stayed: an obscure theoretical position in the introduction of a single book. Except that, a

similar position to Ling's was arrived at by Naomi Goldenberg more than an academic generation later. Goldenberg is a feminist scholar whose work falls into the category of critical scholarship: she regards her contribution to fall within 'a wide range of scholarship and critique that clarifies and interrogates binaries such as religious/secular and religion/politics as well as terms such as post-secular that are fundaments of scholarship both inside the discipline of religious studies and outside of it' (Goldenberg 2015:280). We are then moving away from Ling's strictly historical stance toward one that regards history as the interplay between opposing forces. To her, religion and state do not develop one after another, but contemporaneously, and specifically from the moment that 'self-governing groups, whether ancient or modern, cede sovereignty along with the capacity to commit violence to other groups' (Goldenberg 2013:42). Unlike Ling, Goldenberg has developed and proposed her position several times over the last decade (Goldenberg 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019; Goldenberg & Robertson 2019; Goldenberg & Tuckett 2012). To my knowledge, Goldenberg never cites Ling as a source and there is no reason to suspect that she did not arrive at her conclusions independently. Indeed, there is a major difference between Ling and Goldenberg: instead of 'vestigial civilisation', she refers to religion as a 'vestigial state'.

I argue that religions function as vestigial states composed of mutating institutions and ideologies that exist in relation to the dominant governing order that contains and defines them. Vestigial states are permitted some authority over particular behavioral or territorial jurisdictions pertaining to specific populations. They are 'once and future' governments, alternative ruling orders, governments in waiting that are commonly narrated as having once exercised broader powers in fair and beneficent ways superior to those of the present government. (Goldenberg 2019:4)

Unlike Ling, whose view of the development from a past civilisation to the vestigial civilisation (or religion) was strictly a historical process, Goldenberg sees the relationship between vestigial and non-vestigial state as a relationship of unequal power and social roles: 'Vestigial states that I want to identify as religions tend to behave as once and future states' (Goldenberg 2013:41) and again:

Vestigial states tend to behave as states in waiting, or, as states in hibernation ... A more accurate statement of the theory might describe religions as once and future states. I am reluctant to adopt the phrase because it seems distractingly comic and reminiscent of fairy tale monarchs. Nevertheless, I ask readers to take note of the connotation of time to come that I wish the word *vestigial* would convey. (Goldenberg 2015:282, [author's added emphasis])

There is a key difference between Ling and Goldenberg: the latter allows for the possibility that a 'vestigial state' may one day become a fully fledged state and, if we extrapolate from there, even a civilisation. If a Baha'i civilisation was ever to dominate, it would be unproblematic in Goldenbergian terms. Within those terms, we would expect to see religions arise within that Baha'i superstate, restive movements waiting to take over.

Goldenberg's theory explains things that Ling's never could. But in her attempt to explicate the power relationships between contemporary 'religions' and the state, she fails to answer the historical question: where do these things come from? So, despite the superficial similarity suggested by both the authors using the term 'vestigial', Ling's and Goldenberg's theories are complementary rather than identical. Each explains exactly what the other lacks.

In Ling, we see an explanation of the vast sweep of history, with civilisational empires rising and falling, each leaving behind nothing but a 'religion'. But how do those religions, those vestigial empires then function in whatever new civilizational dispensation they find themselves? This is where Goldenberg's vision comes to the rescue. Vestigial states bide their time, reacting against the status quo when they can, co-operating with it when they must. After all, they have lost the ability to enforce their will by the threat of violence. Sometimes a vestigial state may rise to power again and be able to enforce its vision of reality. But its years in the wilderness, if we can borrow a biblical phrase, has changed it. Against Ling's diachronic view, Goldenberg gives us the synchronic. Against Ling's vision of fossilized remains of earlier civilisations, Goldenberg shows us that even a vestige is capable of effecting social change.

This immediately suggests that a unified Ling/Goldenberg theory would have enormous explanatory power. It would combine Ling's historical criticism with Goldenberg's critical analysis of power relations between state and religion. A 'religion', in such a theory, would be any active counter-cultural movement that is 'vestigial' either in the sense of reaching back to a time when it was itself the dominant culture or forwards to a future time when they believe that they will be that (or both). In such an understanding of the term, the Salafist Muslim looking back towards the glorious days of the Caliphate and the Baha'i looking forward to the day when the Universal House of Justice is indeed the centre of human existence could both be described as religious, with no need to refer to the supernatural referent of their respective beliefs. Moreover, a devoted communist living in a contemporary capitalist society would clearly be a deeply religious person. The 'irreligious' would be those who never challenged the status quo, whatever it happened to be at a specific time and place. The status quo can change: devout pagans found themselves at a loss when the Roman Empire became officially Christian. When that happens, yesterday's civilisational mainstream adherents find themselves as suddenly, inexplicably belonging to a 'religion'.

Such a theoretical position would strip 'religion' of all its supernatural components, which might be a step too far for some. It would see 'Religious Studies' reduced to a new form of the sociology of religion. But perhaps its moment will come too, after it has spent some time as itself a 'vestigial' development, indeed, a 'religion' in the Goldenbergian sense, within academic orthodoxy.

But that has not yet happened and from these two examples, we can see why our first-year students do not start off with either Ling's or Goldenberg's definition of religion. Both deal with specific aspects of religion and ignore others. They lack the kind of universal truth claim that can lead to decades of refutation, counter-refutation and synthesis. It is this that typifies the 'founder' and even the 're-founder' of Religious Studies, as can be seen in my colleagues' contributions.

We cannot all be founders or 'major theorists', as the title of this collection has it. But we do need to ask ourselves how many other worthwhile theoretical insights lie hidden in obscure publications by minor theorists? Who decides who does and does not qualify as a 'major' theorist? I suggest that even here, in the supposedly neutral, objective realm of academia, there are power dynamics at play. Once a theorist has been accepted as 'major', they tend to stay in that position. Another century from today, will we still be starting our students off with definitions by Durkheim and Otto? It may be that our preoccupation with a small number of Ur-texts reflects the theological origins of Religious Studies: a core text with endless commentaries. This is what Thomas Kuhn called 'Normal Science' (Orman 2016) translated into humanities practice. But Normal Science implies the inevitability of a radical paradigm shift. I am not content to wait for such an event: the position of our discipline is too fragile as it is. What is needed is a way, a structural way not subject to the whim of individual researchers, to incorporate 'minor' theorists until their contributions, and their persons, can stand besides the 'major' ones.

Even so, I am not calling for us to abandon the studies of our founders' thoughts. The challenge rather is to integrate their thought, and that of their less influential contemporaries, with that of more contemporary thinkers, to bring them into conversation with us. This will have to be a virtual conversation, as the older theorists are by and large no longer with us. We should heed Ling's (1973) warning that:

To attempt to relate the teachings of the Buddha to that of Karl Marx purely in terms of propositions is ... like trying to get a telephone conversation going between two men who speak different languages, and one of whom cannot hear the other. (p. 21)

Nevertheless, empathetic identification with the beliefs and practices of others is what we are supposed to do in Religious Studies. We should be able to apply it to dead theorists as well as to live interviewees in the field. I have attempted to show here with the examples of Ling and Goldenberg that when we do this, surprisingly fertile avenues of investigation can open up.

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