

# World Religions in the World

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## Abstract

The classification of ‘world religions’ is highly problematic because of its arbitrary construction, its exclusion of indigenous religions, and its easy availability for ideological manipulation. The imperial edifice of ‘world religions’ has been dismantled in recent scholarship in the study of religion. Yet, the notion of ‘world religions’ has been enthusiastically embraced by advocates of inclusive citizenship in democratic societies and by advocates of indigenous empowerment in postcolonial societies. This brief essay reviews the terms of engagement for critically reflecting on the various deployments of ‘world religions’ as a prelude to thinking about religion in the world.

**Keywords:** world religions, indigenous religions, ideology, inclusive citizenship, democracy, indigenous empowerment, postcolonial societies, religion in the world

I have been researching and teaching about religion and religions in South Africa since 1984. I confess that when I first arrived I thought that the study of religion in the country was underdeveloped, except for the work of Martin Prozesky, who besides leading a professional association and editing a peer-reviewed journal was developing research in explaining religion (Prozesky 1984), critically analyzing the entanglements of Christianity with apartheid (Prozesky 1990), profiling the emergent field in the region (Prozesky 1996), and providing textbook resources for the classroom (Prozesky & De Gruchy 1991). While his explanatory theory accounted for religions of the world as ways of maximizing human well-being, his teaching also focused on world

religions in South Africa. In this brief essay in tribute to Martin Prozesky, I want to reflect on the ongoing importance of the study of religion and religions – even the study of ‘world religions’ – against the background of what I have learned in South Africa.

Why is the study of religion important? If we were only interested in writing advertising copy or generating propaganda for the academic study of religion, we might advance this circular argument: Like politics, economics, music, or literature, religion is an important and pervasive human activity. Therefore, teaching and learning about such an activity must obviously be important if we want to know about human beings. This argument is circular because it assumes that the study of something is important because the thing is important. But it tells us nothing about the importance of the study, about its distinctive value proposition. What does this field of teaching and learning bring to the party?

As we know, there are many answers to this question, which is something I like about the academic study of religion. This field is resistant to any orthodoxy. Many voices can be heard. Many positions can contend. This multiplicity of perspectives and positions, I am convinced, is a strength rather than a weakness of the academic study of religion.

Nevertheless, positioning myself, I have found that our key terms – religion and religions – are not merely objects for study. They are occasions for critical and creative reflection on problems of interpretation, explanation, and analysis in the humanities and social sciences. The study of religion, as I understand it, is a critical and creative enterprise. While the criticism of religion, as Karl Marx proposed, is the beginning of all criticism, the creative enterprise of imagining religion as a human project opens new possibilities for understanding a diverse array of powerful discourses, practices, and social formations that are underwritten by claims on transcendence or the sacred.

In my teaching, I dwell in the ambiguity of the very word, ‘religion’. I focus on boundary situations. I concentrate on situations in which the designation has been denied to alternative religious movements in the United States (Chidester 1988a) or to indigenous religions in southern Africa (Chidester 1996). By contrast, I also focus on situations in which the term has been extended to include the ultimate commitments of modern nationalisms (Chidester 1998b) or the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture (Chidester 2005). Accordingly, I find that the term, ‘religion’, is an

enabling term, because it allows for critical and creative reflection on crucial problems of inclusion and exclusion that have both intellectual and social consequences.

The term ‘religions’ poses a related set of problems. How many are there? In principle, their number might be indeterminate and innumerable, but their classification bears traces of particular kinds of social projects. In trying to conceptualize, contain, and perhaps even manage this diversity, European and Euro-American scholars during the nineteenth century came up with the notion of ‘world religions’. We live with that legacy. What do we do about it?

In teaching and learning about religions, we must critically interrogate the historical conditions that have produced the classification of ‘world religions’. This critical reflection, however, cannot be an end in itself. Against this background, we still need to find ways of creatively engaging, understanding, and explaining the discourses and forces that move and motivate people, personally and collectively, religiously.

Although the classification of ‘world religions’, as I will suggest, is highly problematic because of its arbitrary construction, its exclusion of indigenous religions, and its easy availability for being manipulated by agents of various imperial projects, we must also recognize that the notion of ‘world religions’ has also been enthusiastically embraced by advocates of inclusive citizenship in democratic societies and by advocates of indigenous empowerment in postcolonial societies.

Briefly, I review this history of the notion of ‘world religions’, not as if recounting this history were an end in itself, but in the interest of advancing efforts to clear ground and open space for teaching and learning about religion, religions, and religious diversity.

In his series of lectures delivered in 1870 on the science of religion, Friedrich Max Müller, who is often regarded as the founder of the academic study of religion, saw his primary task as classification. Taking as his motto the aphorism, *divide et impera*, which he rendered ‘classify and conquer’, Max Müller proceeded to classify the major religions of the world into three language groups, the Semitic (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the Aryan (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism), and the Turanian (Confucianism and Taoism). Although he did not use the phrase, ‘world religions’, Max Müller nevertheless argued that these eight religions comprised the ‘library of the sacred books of the world’. These textual traditions, with their sacred books and interpretive communities, could be regarded as a library, a religious

archive that could be organized, like any library, according to a general system of classification.

Any modern library, however, whatever system of classification it employs, whether Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress, or some other system, must be all-inclusive. Anything and everything must fit somewhere. But Friedrich Max Müller's 'library of sacred books of the world' was organized by a system of classification, as he quickly admitted, which left out most of the religious life of the world. In his library of eight religions, Müller observed,

The largest portion of mankind, – ay, and some of the most valiant champions in the religious and intellectual struggles of the world, would be unrepresented in our theological library (1873: 116).

F. Max Müller's classification of religions, therefore, was based on a very peculiar system that left out many – if not most – of the religious struggles of the world.

Although the phrase has become conventional, the notion of 'world religions' is actually a very strange construction. As deep background, it arose out of medieval Christian reflections on the variety of religious laws or sects (Biller 1984; Bossy 1982), medieval Christian travel accounts of strange beliefs and customs (for example, Mandeville 1900; see Chidester 2000: 335-340), the early modern Christian 'wars of religion' that made religion a highly charged marker of political difference in Europe (Holt 1995), and the commercial expansion into the Atlantic and Pacific worlds that made religion a highly charged marker of human value outside of Europe (Chidester 1996; 2000:353-490). But European scholars in the late nineteenth century transformed these reflections on difference and encounters with diversity into a science of religion. Raising basic questions, which might have arisen from intellectual curiosity, about human identity and difference, the notion of separate and distinct religions of the world was integrated into European political projects in forging identities based on race, language, and territory (Masuzawa 2005). This construction of 'world religions' capitalized on the ambiguity inherent in the ancient Latin term, *religio*, which could refer to either personal faith or public ritual. Within the classificatory system of 'world religions', personal subjectivity could be defined as symptomatic of adherence to a religious collectivity. Accordingly, people all over the world could be

classified as if their identity, subjectivity, and agency were determined by their religions.

However, as even Max Müller recognized, this system of classification was not adequate, although its inadequacy was not merely its inherent bias towards textual traditions. More seriously and substantially, I would argue, the very notion of ‘world religions’ failed to account for religion, religions, and religious diversity in the world because it was arbitrary, exclusionary, and immediately available for ideological manipulation.

*First*, the framework of ‘world religions’ is completely arbitrary. How many religions, we might ask, are there in the world? In the 1590s, when the word, ‘religions’, first appeared in the English language, there were two, Protestant and Catholic (Harrison 1990: 39). During the eighteenth century, there were four, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Paganism (Pailin 1984). Following Max Müller’s identification of eight religions in 1870, as the study of religion developed in the twentieth century the list of major ‘world religions’ was altered on account of contingent historical factors to remove Zoroastrianism and add Shintoism. Although a recent survey has identified thirty-three principal ‘world religions’ (Eliade *et al.* 2000), common usage of the framework has generally settled on a kind of G8 of major religions in the world.

The gradual increase in the number of recognized religions in the world might suggest an expanding scope of human recognition. But all of these accountings have been based on arbitrary definitions of indeterminate diversity. The arbitrary construction of ‘world religions’ is immediately revealed by considering global demographics. Indigenous African religion, in all of its variety, is a powerful and pervasive religious force in the world. According to statistics compiled by Adherents.com, African traditional and diasporic religions account for the religious affiliation of 100 million people, ranking eighth in this website’s profile of the ‘major religions of the world’ (Adherents.com 2005). Yet African religion never appears on any conventional list of world religions (see Baum 2005; Lewis 1990).

*Second*, as the example of African indigenous and diasporic religion suggests, the framework of ‘world religions’ is exclusionary. By privileging the religions that emerged from urban, agricultural civilizations of the Middle East, India, and the Far East, the model of ‘world religions’ implicitly excludes all forms of indigenous religious life. Max Müller’s library of religions, as he recognized, could only be secured by first factoring out the ‘religious struggles’ of indigenous people all over the world. When not ignored entirely, as they

often are, indigenous religions are incorporated in introductory textbooks to ‘world religions’ as traces of origins and absences. They might no longer register as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’, but indigenous religions have been classified as ‘primal religions’ (Smart 1996; Smith 1994; Richards 1997) or ‘basic religions’ (Hopfe & Woodward 2007), suggesting that they represent the earliest, simplest point of origin transcended by major world religions, an impression reinforced by including them in a consideration of ‘primal and bygone religions’ (Noss 2003). A similar exclusion of indigenous religions is suggested by classifying them as ‘religions of nature’ or ‘nature religions’ (Elwood & McGraw 2005; Kung & Kuschel 1995), which risks suggesting that they belong in the natural rather than cultural world, or by classifying them as ‘tribal religions’ (Carmody & Brink 2006; Matthews 2003) that implicitly have no place within a world comprising civilizations, nations, and especially modern states. Sometimes introductory texts have defined indigenous religions simply as an absence, as in the category, ‘non-literate religions’ (Coogan 1998), as if an entire category could be defined by what it lacks, or by a mix of natural origin and cultural absence, as in the category, ‘nonscriptural nature religions’ (Toropov & Buckles 1997), but the model of ‘world religions’ has struggled with finding terminology for indigenous religions because it is premised on their exclusion.

Although we might assume that the phrase, ‘world religions’, stands in contrast to either non-religion or religions from other planets, it actually seems to operate in opposition to the indigenous religions of colonized people all over the world. In general surveys of ‘world religions’, indigenous religions are rarely referred to as ‘indigenous’ (although see Chidester 2002; Fisher 2006; Ludwig 2006). As William Pietz has observed, that term would imply ‘the right to land, territories, and place’ associated with the kind of indigenous national autonomy asserted by the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations (Pietz 1999: 7-8; Martin & Stahnke 1998: 133-37). By rendering indigenous religions a residual category, the framework of ‘world religions’ excludes any consideration of such claims to indigenous identity and place in the world. Accordingly, it might be argued that the very notion of ‘world religions’ emerged as part of a larger project to exclude such indigenous claims.

*Third*, the framework of ‘world religions’ is readily available for the ideological work of asserting conceptual control over the entire world. In the case of Friedrich Max Müller, following from his guiding aphorism, ‘classify

and conquer’, the division of the world into ‘world religions’ promised conceptual control over religious diversity in the service of the British imperial project (Chidester 2004; see Chidester 2014). Arguably, recent systems of classification, such as Samuel Huntington’s nine ‘world civilizations’, which can be easily mapped as ‘world religions’, continues this ideological work of asserting global conceptual control (Huntington 1993; 1998). Organized within the framework of ‘world religions’, clashing civilizations can be not only understood but also managed from the imperial center.

Certainly, we can find evidence of such imperial use of the idea of ‘world religions’. In the middle of the nineteenth century, as Great Britain was expanding its empire, the British theologian F. D. Maurice undertook a study of world religions, which he justified on the grounds that knowledge about religions would be useful for a nation that was ‘engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them’ (Maurice 1847: 255; see Chidester 1996: 131-32). In the middle of the twentieth century, as the United States was assuming an imperial role in the wake of the collapse of European empires, American scholar of religion Huston Smith undertook a study of world religions, which he justified in 1958, based on his experience of lecturing to officers of the U.S. Air Force, as providing useful knowledge for military personnel because ‘someday they were likely to be dealing with the peoples they were studying as allies, antagonists, or subjects of military occupation’ (Smith 1958: 7-8; see McCutcheon 1997: 180-81).

These recommendations for the study of religion suggest a remarkable continuity from British imperialism to American neo-imperialism in justifying the field of study as an intellectual instrument of international trade, military conquest, and political administration of alien subjects. Such strategic justifications for the study of religion and religions persist, as we find in the introductory course, ‘Religious Factors in Special Operations’, offered by Chaplain Ken Stice at the United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. In the syllabus for this course, Chaplain Stice identified the ‘terminal learning objective’ as enabling a Special Operations soldiers to brief their commanders on the impact of religion and religions on a mission and its forces. ‘Why do Special Operations soldiers need to study religion at all?’ Chaplain Stice asked. ‘Primarily, because of the truth of Special Operations Imperative #1: Understand the Operational Environment!’ As an adjunct to military strategy and tactics, therefore, the study of religion and religions can be useful in gaining the cooperation or submission of

adherents of foreign, unfamiliar religions that Chaplain Stice could characterize as ‘different from our own’ (Stice 1997).

But military strategy cannot provide the only rationale for the study of religion, religions, and religious diversity. As an alternative, we can consider the rationale provided in a popular text, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the World’s Religions*, which argues that understanding religions is important for dealing not with foreign aliens but with fellow citizens in a diverse society. ‘In an earlier era’, the authors suggest, ‘unfamiliar religious systems could be dismissed as ‘foreign’ and left for the scholars to explore’. In a rapidly changing world of increasing local diversity and expanding global connectivity, however, learning about religion and religions has become necessary for everyone, ‘even if you don’t have an advanced degree in comparative religion’, the authors of the *Idiot’s Guide* urge, adding the tantalizing question: ‘Why leave all the excitement to academics?’ (Toporov & Buckles 1997: 7).

By contrast to the imperial strategy, the *Idiot’s Guide* announces a different rationale for studying religion and religions that has emerged under conditions of increased religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity within urban centers of the West. Increasingly, people encounter adherents of other religions not only in international business, military operations, or foreign missions but also at home. As the *Idiot’s Guide* explains, ‘At one point or another, just about everyone has felt some form of anxiety about encountering an unfamiliar religious tradition’ (Toropov & Buckles 1997: *frontis*). Therefore, everyone needs to learn how to deal with personal feelings of anxiety about the unfamiliar; to avoid personal embarrassment in dealing with others; and to live knowledgably, comfortably, and confidently in a multicultural, multireligious world. Ultimately, the *Idiot’s Guide* recommends the study of religion and religions as an antidote to fear of the unknown. ‘Perhaps the most important reason to study faiths beyond one’s own’, the authors advise, ‘is that it is a marvelous way to replace fear with experience and insight. It’s hard to be frightened of something you really understand’ (Toropov & Buckles 1997: 8). The study of religion and religions, therefore, emerges as a kind of therapy for fear. ‘The more you know about other faiths’, the authors promise, ‘the less fear will be a factor in your dealings with people who practice those faiths’ (Toropov & Buckles 1997: 10).

By treating adherents of different religions as local citizens rather than

as foreign subjects, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the World's Religions* represents a significant alternative to the imperial study of religion, suggesting that the very notion of 'world religions' can be interpreted against the grain of its imperial origin. Recent research on religion in public education in Europe and Africa has shown that 'world religions' can signify different things – an alienating framework to be rejected, an inclusive framework to be embraced – depending upon the aims and objectives of specific national projects. Researchers in Britain or Germany, for example, have found the notion of 'world religions' to be an obstacle that has to be overcome through local ethnography (Jackson 1997) or dialogue (Weisse 1999). By contrast, researchers in southern Africa, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, who have been subjected to specific regimes of Christian establishment, have found the notion of 'world religions' to be an inclusive, empowering avenue for opening the study of religion, religions, and religious diversity (Chidester 2003). The inclusion of African indigenous religion, in particular, has been advocated as a liberating initiative (Mndende 1998; 1999). Therefore, if the notion of 'world religions' has enduring political import, its educational politics is currently being engaged differently all over the world.

The intellectual construction of 'world religions' bears a complex political history, with its origin in imperial conquest, its mobilization within pluralistic modern states for liberal tolerance and co-existence, and its more recent redeployment within various colonized regions of the world for the local liberation of suppressed communities from oppressive religious discrimination. In the world, therefore, the framework of 'world religions' is a contested terrain. Fortunately, the academic study of religious discourses and practices, religious subjectivities and collectivities, religious traditions and interactions does not depend upon any notion of 'world religions'. However, as long as traces of this notion arise, whether in pedagogical practice or national policy, critical reflection on the historical emergence and various deployments of the notion of 'world religions' will be useful in clearing the ground for thinking about religion in the world.

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