CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Local Traditions and World Religions. Encountering 'Religion' in Southeast Asia and Melanesia

Michel Picard

In his influential book *Conceptualizing Religion*, the American anthropologist Benson Saler asserts that 'Religion is a Western folk category that contemporary Western scholars have appropriated' (Saler 2000: IX). As a consequence, anthropologists are liable to use this Western category in order to make sense of what is assumed to be a core identity marker for non-Western peoples. As perplexing as this is, the problem is compounded by the fact that the category 'religion' has been appropriated not only by Western scholars but also by the peoples studied by anthropologists.

Whereas Saler was conceptualizing religion with a view to transforming this Western folk category into an analytical concept suitable for cross-cultural research,[1] our aim is to elucidate what happens when

[1] Notwithstanding, as Maurice Bloch reminds us, that 'anthropologists have, after countless fruitless attempts, found it impossible to usefully and convincingly cross-culturally isolate or define a distinct phenomenon that can analytically be labelled "religion"' (Bloch 2008: 2055).

M. Picard (✉)
Centre Asie du Sud-Est, CNRS-EHESS, Paris, France

© The Author(s) 2017

M. Picard (ed.), *The Appropriation of Religion in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-56230-8_1

non-Western peoples themselves claim to 'have a religion.' If indeed it is true that 'to define 'religion' is first and foremost an act,' in the sense that 'to define is to leave out some things and to include others' (Asad 2001: 145), then we will concern ourselves with the very act of asserting that some things are 'religious' and others are not. That is to say that there is no such thing as 'religion' out there, 'only a wide variety of human practices, beliefs, or experiences that may or may not be categorized as such, depending on one's definition' (Hanegraaff 2016: 582). Accordingly, we are not concerned here with establishing what 'religion' ought to mean or what exactly it refers to. Rather, in social constructionist fashion, we are interested in investigating how this category operates for the people who appropriate it and what they do with it. In this respect, for us the relevant question is no longer 'What is religion?' but 'What does and what does not count as religion in a given context' and, above all, 'Who gets to make this decision and why?'

'Religion' is notoriously difficult to define. To this day, there is no scholarly consensus as to 'what religion really is.' The various definitions of religion may be categorized according to a distinction between so-called 'substantive' and 'functional' interpretations. According to the former, religion consists of paying homage to the gods, and their anthropological formulation begins with Edward Tylor's famous minimal definition of religion as 'belief in spiritual beings' and extends to Melford Spiro's 'culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Spiro 1966). Functional definitions focus on what is of 'ultimate concern' (Paul Tillich), to either an individual or to a social group. The problem with these approaches is that substantive definitions are too narrow to account for situations occurring in cultures that do not conceive of a distinction between religious and secular domains, whereas functional definitions are too broad to establish any empirical boundaries around religion and to thus distinguish it from other sociocultural phenomena. Following Émile Durkheim, religion has been further characterized as concerned with the relationship between man and the 'sacred' (Borgeaud 1994), which was construed as an ontological category manifest in feelings of awe by phenomenologists like Rudolf Otto ('numinous') and Mircea Eliade ('hierophany'), for whom the human being is a *homo religiosus*—thereby substituting a hierocentric definition of religion supposedly found in all cultures for the previous theocentric model.

In any case, such attempts to define religion in transhistorical and transcultural terms necessarily impute upon it a fixed essence, which is

precisely what is denounced by scholars who deny the prevalent assumption of the religious studies discourse—the universality of religion as a distinct domain of human societies.[2] They propose instead to submit religious phenomena, like all other social facts, to the critical analysis of the social sciences, an approach deemed 'reductionist' by their opponents, who claim that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon. On the contrary, these critics argue that religion is neither natural nor universal, but instead a specifically Christian, Eurocentric, modern category that has been unduly projected on ancient and foreign cultures.

Genealogy of the Category 'Religion'

'Religion' is neither a descriptive nor an analytical term but a prescriptive and normative category and a contentious one at that. Originating in the Roman notion of *religio*, it was appropriated by Christian theologians, who radically shifted its meaning by uprooting it from its 'pagan' framework (Sachot 2007). To the Romans, *religio* was what *traditio* is all about, a set of ancestral practices developed by a people and transmitted over generations.[3] Just as there are different peoples, so are there different traditions. As a set of practices, the predicates 'true' and 'false' are not applicable to tradition. By claiming to be the true *religio*, Christianity opposed its doctrines to the prevalent practices, rejected as false beliefs marred by 'superstition.' This distinction between *vera* and *falsa religio* marked a conceptual shift characterized by a scriptural turn, a substitution of dogma for ritual, of orthodoxy for orthopraxy, that introduced a novel kind of truth: a revealed, absolute truth (Assmann 2003). The

[2] See Goody (1961), Smith (1962), Gauchet (1985), Asad (1993), Staal (1996), McCutcheon (1997, 2004), Fitzgerald (1997, 2000, 2007), Smith (1998), Dubuisson (1998, 2007), King (1999a, 2011), Nye (2000), Peterson and Walhof (2002), McKinnon (2002), Balagangadhara (2005), Masuzawa (2005), Bell (2006), Nongbri (2014). For some of these authors at least, the critique of the category religion appears to be part and parcel of the post-colonial denunciation of dominant Western worldviews and epistemologies.

[3] As is well known, Cicero's etymology related *religio* to *religere*, meaning 'to retrace' or 'to read anew.' In this sense, *religio* involved the scrupulous reiteration of the ritual traditions of one's ancestors. In the early fourth century, the Christian theologian Lactantius rejected Cicero's etymology, arguing instead that *religio* derives from *religare*, meaning 'to bind' or 'to link,' which eventually became the common understanding of religion. On the origin and evolution of the category religion, see Sachot (2003).

Christian appropriation of *religio* thus established the exclusivist monotheism of Christianity as the normative paradigm for understanding what a religion is. Religion became a matter of adherence to a particular doctrine rather than allegiance to customary ritual practices. The religious field, previously embedded in the culture of a particular society, then turned into an autonomous domain that could be taken up by other societies. The question remains as to how this Christian theological category, which issued from a specific polemical context, evolved to the point of becoming the central explanatory category of religious studies.

It is important to note that for most of the history of European Christendom, the word 'religion' (*religio*) meant something very different than it does in contemporary usage (Smith 1962, 1998; Despland 1980). 'Religion' is a secular category, in the sense that its modern understanding as a 'system of beliefs and practices' is a product of secularization, that is, of the differentiation of spheres of life in modern societies (Bourdieu 1971; Asad 2003). Specifically, secularization refers not only to the formal institutional separation of Church and State, but further to an epistemic turn in which a field of beliefs and practices comes to be constituted as 'religion' as such. This religious field emerged during the Renaissance, evolved as a result of the Reformation and was reworked in the Enlightenment, before acquiring its present significance in the course of the nineteenth century.

The Protestant doctrine of salvation focused attention on inner piety and personal faith. With this emphasis on private religious consciousness, institutional forms of liturgy, priesthood and Church were relegated to merely external social phenomena. This shift to belief as the defining characteristic of religion resulted in a change from an institutionally based understanding of exclusive salvation within the Catholic Church to a propositionally based understanding that thereafter conceived of religion as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent (Fitzgerald 2007).

The fragmentation of Christendom following the Reformation resulted not only in confessional disputes and 'Wars of Religion,' but also in critical comparisons of competing forms of Christianity. Polemics and apologetics among Christians prompted the proponents of 'deism' to deal with these disputes by trying to determine the lowest common denominator of the various Christian denominations, an approach that was eventually extended to all creeds. The search for a universal core of religion based on reason instead of revelation produced a substantive

definition of what came to be known as 'natural religion'—as distinct from the 'revealed religion' of Christianity—defined as a set of beliefs (which hinged upon the existence of one supreme being), practices (in the form of sanctioned worship) and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life), supposed to be common to all peoples (Asad 1993: 40; see Bossy 1985, Byrne 1989, Harrison 1990, Stroumsa 2010).

At the same time that this universal core of religion was being devised, the discovery of the rites and creeds of faraway peoples in the Americas and Asia as well as the rediscovery of antiquity were calling into question the Biblical world of faith. These combined circumstances set the stage for construing the peoples of the world as being divided into different 'religions,' conceived as objectified doctrinal systems, each with their own distinct claims to propositional truth. Thus, from the seventeenth century onward, the conventional ordering for categorizing the peoples of the world in terms of Christians, Jews, Mohammedans and heathens turned into a division between four sorts of religions—Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism and heathenism[4]—but with only one 'right' way of worshipping God. In this perspective, Christianity provided the norm to which Judaism and Mohammedanism could be somehow related as competing 'Abrahamic religions',[5] as opposed to heathenism, long perceived as an indiscriminate lump.

As the voyages of exploration and the subsequent rise of colonialism were providing opportunities for European scholars, administrators and missionaries to acquire some first-hand knowledge of heathens' manifold customs, this latter category was progressively disaggregated into distinct religions. In the course of the nineteenth century, the prevalent fourfold division of humanity declined to be replaced by a list of 'world religions' that could be compared with one another as particular instances of the universal genus 'religion' (Masuzawa 2005). The common assumption of

[4] In this process, heathenism, or paganism, became a central organizing category governing much of Europe's early relationship to both the new worlds discovered by travelers and missionaries, and the ancient worlds recovered by philologists. See Ryan (1981) and Chidester (1996).

[5] Notwithstanding the fact that each of these 'Abrahamic' religions claims to be the sole rightful heir to Abraham's covenant, they share references, beliefs and practices that distinguish them quite radically from other traditions. On this, see for example Hughes (2012) and Levenson (2012).

Western scholarship was that these world religions shared essential similarities with Christianity—even though, weighed against what was considered to be God's last word, they were necessarily found wanting—in the terms of which they were assessed: namely formal soteriological doctrines resting on canonical authority, enforced by a priestly hierarchy and sustained by congregational worship. From the prevailing evolutionist perspective of the times, world religions were considered advanced religions, as opposed to ethnic religions, regarded as primitive and riddled with superstition.

In sum, the contemporary understanding of 'religion' emerged both out of the encounter of Christendom with other 'religions' during the great march of European discoveries and colonial expansion and of Enlightenment struggles to differentiate between rational knowledge and revealed dogmas to emancipate society from the smothering power of the Church—in such a way that it eventually became conceivable to separate the study of religion from its practice. Thus presented in a secular garb by post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment thinkers, the Christian conception of religion became a scholarly construct with the development of the so-called science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) (Sharpe 1986). As a result, at issue is the fact that the category religion is too imbued with Christian theological apologetics, as well as with European colonialism and Western modernity, to have a transcultural or a transhistorical relevance. Consequently, 'religion' ought not be taken for a conceptual tool but, rather, should itself be the object of analysis. That is to say, instead of essentializing religion as if it were a universal and generic category, one needs to historicize and deconstruct it.[6]

Asian Traditions as World Religions

Whereas in the Christian context 'religion' exists as a category to its own participants, outside of this context it is a second-order category, constructed by observers from a variety of phenomena which the actors do not necessarily combine into a coherent institution and for which they

[6] One of the first scholars to deconstruct the category religion was Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962). Yet he too clung to essentialism. In retracing the genealogy of the category religion, Smith separates 'faith' from what he calls 'cumulative tradition.' And in taking faith to be primary and transcendent in opposition to religious traditions, treated as its secondary worldly expressions, he holds to a typically Protestant outlook, which is not surprising coming from a Presbyterian minister.

usually do not possess a corresponding word (Cohn 1969). Now, it appears that the terms under which Christianity defines itself as a religion are comparable to the terms under which Islam and Judaism recognize themselves as religions. Therefore, the category religion is to some extent common to these three Abrahamic traditions, which are related by a similar belief in one exclusive God and divine revelation recorded in a Holy Book. In contrast, there was no corresponding indigenous terminology in Asian traditions prior to the modern period. According to the approach of the contributors to this volume, if there is no equivalent term in another culture, it is not only the word that is missing, but that particular entity 'religion' itself—in the sense of a set of beliefs and practices with some kind of systemic coherence that could be conceptually isolated from other aspects of social life, and to which one could 'convert'—does not exist. In this respect, we concur with Ludwig Wittgenstein that analyzing a concept amounts to analyzing the use of a word. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of an institutionalized religion in the absence of a vernacular denomination substantiating its existence.

However, the fact that religion is 'a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture' (Smith 1998: 269) does not imply that it is 'solely the creation of the scholar's study,' as Jonathan Smith would have it (1982: XI)—not only because, historically, the concept of 'religion' was not created by scholars but emerged over the centuries as a discursive formation proper to Christian culture, but, more to the point, because members of other cultures have now appropriated the term religion to define some of their practices as differentiated from others. Hence, a distinction has to be made between scholarly analytical definitions of the term religion and its indigenous uses, between its etic and its emic understandings.[7] In other words, the issue is to investigate the historical process whereby the category 'religion' has become self-evident even to those for whom it was previously a novelty (King 2011: 45).

As it happens, it was not enough for missionaries, along with Orientalists and colonial administrators, to impute characteristic features of Christianity to Asian traditions to bring forth such 'religions' as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism and

[7] In this, I must agree with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who argues that 'No common analysis of religion can be given by a believer and a non-believer' (Lévi-Strauss 1972: 188).

Shintoism[8]—as if local people were only passive recipients and had no agency of their own in the matter. Their native interlocutors had to further claim for themselves the privilege of possessing their own religion, construed as a soteriological system on a par with Christianity. To do this, they emphasized the doctrinal features as well as the ethical precepts in their traditions, while condemning blind superstition, mindless priestcraft and backward customs. By conforming orthopraxy to orthodoxy, reformers attempted to discriminate between 'true religion' and 'mere tradition.' Such a replacement of disparate local traditions by a normative and de-territorialized form of religion was marked by rationalization (the formulation of a canonical corpus, its institutionalization and its effective socialization), as well as by secularization (the de-sacralization of the immanent concrete in favor of an abstract and transcendent divine) (Hefner 1993, 1998). In addition, it usually brought about a politicization of religion, which was instrumentalized to articulate ethnic or national identities.

The dialogic construction of 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' as world religions is a case in point. Ever since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), there has been a tendency to see the forms of knowledge produced by colonial scholars, administrators and missionaries as a one-sided imposition of power, tantamount to denying agency to colonial subjects—when in fact, from the very beginning, Asian actors exposed to European representations and criticisms of their 'religion' became active participants in Orientalist discourse. Lest we be suspected of granting colonial power too much credit in this affair, let us declare from the outset with Tomoko Masuzawa that 'the European-initiated ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism [...] could not have acquired such an overwhelming sense of reality had it not been for those who positively and actively identified themselves as Hindus or Buddhists [...] What remains yet to be studied concertedly is the very process of mutually interactive development, on the one hand, of European representations of non-Christian religions and, on the other hand, the native appropriation, reaction, or resistance to such representations' (Masuzawa 2005: 282).

Due to India's long history of exposure to both Islam and Christianity, Hinduism provides an informative paradigm for

[8] See Oberoi (1994), Lopez (1995), Jensen (1997), Girardot (1999), Brekke (2002), Mandair (2009), Goossaert and Palmer (2011), Josephson (2012), van der Veer (2014).

understanding the relational process through which a local tradition was turned into a world religion. As is well known, the word 'Hindu'—the Persian form of the Sanskrit word 'Sindhu' (the Indus river)—was originally a geographic and ethnic identifier, used by the Persians to designate the inhabitants of the country they named Hindustan (the land of the Hindus). For the Persians, Hindus were Indians that were not Muslims (Sharma 2002).

Some of those designated as 'Hindus' began to use that word by the sixteenth century in order to distinguish themselves from the 'foreign and barbarous' peoples, the *mleccha*, who were not thought of primarily as 'Muslims' (Sanderson 2015: 156, n. 2). Not before the eighteenth century did Hindus begin to acknowledge that those barbarous foreigners were Muslims (O'Connell 1973). But even when used by indigenous Indians, it is clear that the term 'Hindu' carried no specifically religious denotation, as revealed by the fact that in the early nineteenth century it was still common to refer to natives who had converted to Islam or Christianity as Hindu Muslims and Hindu Christians.

In the course of the eighteenth century, European observers took the term 'Hindu' to designate the followers of a particular Indian religion, after having long wondered whether they comprised one religion or several (Marshall 1970; Sweetman 2003; Gelders 2009). Through a process of reification, the word 'Hindooism' was first coined in 1787 by the Evangelical missionary (and subsequent director of the East India Company) Charles Grant, to name 'the religion of the Hindoos' (Oddie 2006: 71)—an imagined religion that had never existed as a religion in the minds of Hindus themselves. Hitherto, there had been only multiple communities identified by locality, language, caste, lineage, occupation and sectarian affiliation. Indeed, Hindus could not consider themselves to be members of a single religious community, because their idea of *dharma* insisted upon distinctions between heterogeneous groups.

The concept of *dharma* is complex and cannot be reduced to one general principle. Nor is there one single translation that encompasses all its meanings—which span religion, ritual, law, conduct and ethics—all of which are distinct in the Western perspective. *Dharma* is both an account of the cosmos and a norm on which to base social life, which at once describes how things are and prescribes the way they should be. It is an all-encompassing category, whose scope is both considerably broader and much more specific than that of the category religion (Rocher 2003; Holdrege 2004).

Dharma may be defined as that which upholds the world and supports order. In the *Dharmaśāstra*,[9] the word *dharma* refers specifically to the *varnāśramadharma*, the duties and qualifications of an individual according to his social class (*varna*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). That is to say, the differential norms of *varnāśramadharma* apply only to the *svadharma* of the male members of the 'twice-born' *varna* (*brāhmana*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*). *Dharma* is thus an exclusive and personal norm, as attested by the well-known verse from the *Bhagavadgītā* that states: 'It is better to perform one's own *dharma* poorly than to perform another's *dharma* well' (B.G. 3.35).

Now, as a result of the demands of British colonial administration, on the one hand, as well as of the pursuits of Christian missionaries, on the other, the concept of *dharma* has been both fragmented and universalized. In his Judicial Plan of 1772, Warren Hastings, the first British Governor-General of Bengal, decreed that the Hindus should be governed by the laws of the Shastra and the Muslims by the law of the Quran (Rocher 1993: 220). This decision implied that native laws would apply only to 'religious' matters, that is, matters corresponding to that which in Britain fell under the purview of ecclesiastical law. This put the British in a position of having to discriminate the religious from the lay in all subjects relating to the Hindus. Furthermore, the source of law was to be found in the *Dharmaśāstra* rather than in local jurisprudence and other living sources of the law. In consequence, law and religion, which were inextricably enmeshed in the *Dharmaśāstra*, were artificially set apart.

Then, from 1800 onward, when Baptist missionaries in Bengal translated the Bible—which they titled *dharmapustaka* ('the book of *dharma*') in Sanskrit—they chose the term *dharma* as a gloss for the term religion and began to proclaim Christianity as the 'true *dharma*' (*satyādharma*).[10] By thus depriving the Hindus of their *dharma*, which they expounded as a false religion, the missionaries channeled the

[9] The *Dharmaśāstra* are ancient Sanskrit treatises of the Brahmanical tradition that refer to the branch of learning (*śāstra*) pertaining to the subject of *dharma*. They are considered part of the *smṛti* ('that which is remembered,' i.e., the 'tradition') and find their source in the transcendent authority of the *Veda*—the *śruti* ('that which is heard,' i.e., the 'revelation').

[10] In contrast, in South India, where Jesuit missionaries had been translating the Bible since the close of the sixteenth century, the category religion was commonly rendered by the terms *veda* and *mata*. Thus, Christianity was dubbed the 'true Veda' (*satyāvedam*) and the Bible was titled *vedapustaka*.

Hindu reaction in two directions (Halbfass 1988: 342). On the one hand, in order to meet the Christian challenge, Hindus themselves started using the word *dharma* in the sense of religion, with the result that the Hindu *dharma* became one religion among others, to be compared and opposed to the Christian *dharma* or the Muslim *dharma*. On the other hand, some Hindus disclaimed the exclusive character of the *varnāshramadharma* and attempted instead to universalize *dharma*, by invoking the inclusive notion of *sanātanadharma* as the 'eternal and universal religion.' In that respect, *dharma* was considered as a principle superior to and, moreover, encompassing all religions.

In 1816, the term 'Hinduism' was first appropriated by a Hindu, the Bengali religious reformer Rammohun Roy, who was also the first Indian to speak of *dharma* in the sense of religion (Killingley 1993: 61). In due course, the name Hinduism was taken up by the Anglicized Indian elites, in their attempt to establish a religion that could compete with Christianity and Islam for equal standing. For the members of this Western-educated intelligentsia, the English language was not just a means of communicating with a foreign culture; it also served as a medium in which they articulated their self-understanding and reinterpreted their own traditions. They initiated reform movements that drew on models from both the contemporary West and an idealized Indian past that was actively been uncovered by British Orientalists (Kopf 1969). Whereas Hindu practices were traditionally localized, sectarian and segregated, reformers formed pan-Indian associations that promoted the idea of a single inclusive religion for all Hindus, now being defined as a national religious community.

In the evolutionary worldview of nineteenth-century Europe, monotheism was seen as the highest form of religion. Embracing the Protestant emphasis on sacred texts as the locus of religion, reformers singled out Vedic and Brahmanical scriptures as canonical, while dismissing popular religious practices. They claimed that Hinduism was originally a monotheistic religion, whose true doctrines were to be found either in the *Veda*, the *Upaniṣad* or the *Bhagavadgītā*, but which had degenerated into polytheism and image worship during the Puranic period. In this, they aligned themselves with the Orientalists, for whom

true Hinduism was the pristine religion of bygone India and not that which was commonly observable in modern times.

In response to missionary criticism and for fear of conversion to Christianity, reformers pressed their fellow coreligionists to eradicate what the missionaries described as 'demonic' practices, and they set about drawing a distinction between true Hinduism and mere traditions. This distinction was commonly framed in terms of a contrast between that which belongs to *dharma* and that which pertains to *ācāra*—the established rules of conduct that constitute *varnāśramadharma*, which are thus endorsed by the *Dharmaśāstra* but which the reformers did not consider to be an essential part of Hinduism.

In point of fact, reformers held divergent opinions on the principles of reformed Hinduism.[11] Whatever their particular tenets, all these reform movements met with resistance from Hindu traditionalists, who formed conservative organizations dedicated to the defense of the *sanātana dharma*. Despite their claims that this was the 'eternal religion,' *sanātana dharma* is as modern a construct as Hinduism, in the sense that it emerged as a self-conscious reaction to both Christianity and reform movements (Halbfass 1988: 343–346).

In any case, it was not before the book *Hinduism* was published in 1877 by the famous British Sanskritist Sir Monier Monier-Williams that the term Hinduism gained full currency in English. But even then, it was not universally accepted in India itself. Thus, when the British colonial government introduced a census in 1871, many Indians either did not understand the category or else refused the label Hindu outright (Haan 2005). As there are no criteria for deciding who is and who is not a Hindu, government officials resolved that Hinduism could only be defined residually, that is, Hindus are Indians who are neither Muslims, nor Christians, nor Sikhs, nor Jains, nor Buddhists, and so on. In other

[11] One can distinguish three main reform-minded responses to the Christian attack on Hinduism. Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) and the Brāhmo Samāj (founded in 1828) saw Christianity as one instance of universalist religion and combined elements of Sufism, Advaita Vedānta and Christian Unitarianism into a common religion with strong deist tendencies (Kopf 1979; Mitter 1987). A few decades later, Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883) and the Ārya Samāj (founded in 1875) adopted a much more radical stance by rejecting Christianity altogether and calling for the Āryas to 'Go back to the Veda' (Jordens 1978; Llewellyn 1993). A third response was developed by Vivekananda (1863-1902), who argued that Christianity was simply a lesser form of the universal spirituality found in all religions, which had reached its highest level in Advaita Vedānta (Radice 1998; Basu 2002).

words, Hindus are those who are left after others have set themselves apart. It was only after the publication in 1923 of the book *Essentials of Hindutva*[12] by V.D. Savarkar—which popularized the neologism *hindutva* ('Hinduness')—that Hinduism became a common denomination in India, and this in a nationalist perspective.

The point here is that defining Hinduism is not only difficult but contentious as well, because 'Hinduism' is an ideological construct.[13] In this respect, the nineteenth-century reform movements did not so much describe what Hinduism was, as prescribe what it should be. Hence, the name 'Neo-Hinduism' commonly given to this idealized Hinduism (Hacker 1995), which in actual fact never concerned more than a tiny minority of those regarded as Hindus, who continued worshipping their gods, singing their songs and telling their stories.

The denomination 'Buddhism' appears to have arisen at around the same time as its sibling 'Hinduism' (King 1999a). According to Philip Almond (1988), the invention of Buddhism as a world religion occurred in two distinct phases. From the late eighteenth century onward, a motley collection of religious phenomena throughout Asia was being classified under the purview of the 'religion of Buddha,' soon to be labeled 'Buddhism.' Thus the word Buddhism appeared several times in the first issue of *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies* in 1816 and was popularized by the Orientalist Edward Upham, whose 1829 volume *The History and Doctrine of Buddhism* was the first book in English to include the name 'Buddhism' in its title.

By the late nineteenth century, fully fledged Orientalist discourse about Buddhism had developed. Early Buddhologists assumed that the original Buddhism was the authentic Buddhism and that its ancient Pāli

[12] Reprinted in 1928 under the title *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*

[13] Numerous studies have been published on the construction of 'Hinduism' as a 'religion.' See Marshall (1970), Inden (1986), Thapar (1989), Fitzgerald (1990), Frykenberg (1993), Hawley (1991), Dalmia and von Stietencron (1995), Von Stietencron (1997), Lorenzen (1999), King (1999a, b, 2011), Sontheimer and Kulke (2001), Sharma (2002), Sugirtharajah (2003), Sweetman (2003), Balagangadhara (2005), Pennington (2005), Lipner (2006), Jha (2006), Bloch et al. (2010).

canon[14] contained its definitive doctrine. Competence in Pāli, and a corresponding familiarity with the canonical texts, grew progressively, to achieve excellence in the work of Thomas William Rhys Davids, whose book *Buddhism* appeared in 1877 (the very same year that saw the publication of Monier-Williams' *Hinduism*). In 1881, Rhys Davids founded in Ceylon the Pāli Text Society with a view to foster and promote the study of Pāli scriptures. Thereafter, 'originally existing 'out there' in the Oriental present, Buddhism came to be determined as an object the primary location of which was the West, through the progressive collection, translation, and publication of its textual past' (Almond 1988: 13).

By that time, Buddhism had been distinguished from Hinduism and was conceived as having been founded by Gautama in India. The historical Buddha was thought to have challenged Vedic authority presided over by the Brahman priesthood and rejected the inequities of the caste system. He was valued, in consequence, as a rationalist reformer of the evils of Hinduism—just as Luther had reformed the decadent Roman Catholic Church—and Buddhism came to be seen as the Indian Protestantism.[15] Yet, if Buddhism, as it was being construed through the editing and studying of its ancient texts, was viewed somewhat favorably in opposition to Hinduism, it was painfully clear that its contemporary manifestations in the Orient measured unfavorably against their ideal textual exemplifications. Due to this perceived disparity between the canonical Buddhist texts and the actual practices of Buddhists, Buddhism was henceforth seen as being in a general state of decay. This was particularly the case with later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, as contrasted with Theravāda Buddhism seen as containing the essence of Buddhism.

While Almond referred to the formulation of an Orientalist image of Buddhism in Victorian Britain, he made no attempt to inquire into Buddhist thought and practice in nineteenth-century Asia, denying

[14] Pāli is a Prakrit, an ancient vernacular language of India derivative of Sanskrit. Etymologically meaning 'text,' the word Pāli had been used since the eighteenth century to designate the language of the *Tipiṭaka*, the canonical texts of Theravāda Buddhism, the 'Doctrine of the Elders,' dominant in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia. On Theravāda Buddhism, see Gombrich (2006), and on the modern genealogy of the terms 'Theravāda' and 'Theravāda Buddhism,' see Perreira (2012).

[15] This is especially the case of Theravāda, as opposed to Mahāyāna (the 'Great Way,' that was taken up in China whence it spread to East Asia) and to Vajrayāna (the 'Diamond Way,' established in Tibet and Mongolia), which have been commonly likened to Roman Catholicism. On this, see Gellner (1990).

any voice to Buddhists in the representation of Buddhism as religion (Hallisey 1995: 31; see Harris 2006). The fact is that the editing and publishing of the Pāli canon by Orientalists made it accessible to a wider range of Buddhists than ever before, at a time when attacks on Buddhism by Christian missionaries were stirring up reactions among both monastic and urban elites in Ceylon and Southeast Asia, initiating a reform movement that has been characterized as 'Buddhist Modernism' by Heinz Bechert (1966; see McMahan 2008) and as 'Protestant Buddhism' by Gananath Obeyesekere (1970; see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Originally, Buddhist Modernism sought to respond to the negative colonial portrayal of Buddhism by presenting its teachings in modern and positive terms. It was both a protest against Christianity and a confrontation with popular Buddhism. In dealing with Christian proselytism, this reformed Buddhism assumed some of the characteristics of Protestant Christianity and became a challenge to Theravāda Buddhism as actually practiced. It was characterized by an emphasis on scriptures, rationality, meditation, ethics and increased participation of the laity, along with a de-emphasis on ritual, dogma, clerical hierarchy, traditional cosmology and 'superstition.' Although this movement was novel in many ways, its promoters claimed to return to the original teachings of the Buddha himself, prior to the extraneous cultural accretions that had become associated with it over the centuries. Thus it is that, in some respects, 'Buddhism was represented as a "world religion" fully the equal of Christianity in antiquity, geographical expanse, membership, and philosophical profundity, with its own founder, sacred scriptures, and fixed body of doctrine' (Lopez 1998: 185). But, in other respects, Buddhism was not just considered on a par with other religions; it was posited as superior to them—just as the Hindu *dharma* claimed a spiritual heritage superior to that of mere religions.[16]

Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the co-founder and first president of the Theosophical Society, has been credited with initiating the revival that gave birth to Protestant Buddhism (Prothero 1995). He introduced

[16]The similarity between Hindu and Buddhist reform movements went even further, in the sense that in his speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions conducted in 1893 in Chicago the Sinhalese revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala rejected the very term 'Buddhism' as a Western construct, preferring instead 'Ārya Dharma,' just like Dayananda Sarasvati and the Ārya Samāj had attempted to replace the term 'Hinduism' with 'Ārya Dharma,' that is, the system of doctrines and duties held and practiced by the Āryas.

into modern Sinhalese consciousness the notion of Buddhism as a system of beliefs through the publication in 1881 of his *Buddhist Catechism* (Olcott 1881),[17] modeled upon Protestant catechisms, which has gone through numerous editions and been translated into many languages, and is still in use in Sri Lankan schools. The emulation of the Christian model was further manifested in his formulation of fourteen 'Fundamental Buddhist Beliefs' in 1891. Considering Olcott's prominence in Sinhalese Buddhist revival[18]—and taking into account his aspiration to unify the diversity of the Buddhist world beyond Ceylon to Burma, India and Japan—it is tempting to see Buddhist Modernism as a mere product of colonialism, the combined outcome of Victorian Orientalism and Protestant Christianity. Yet we should be aware that the concern with religious renewal on the basis of textual authority is not entirely a modern innovation but was an integral part of Theravāda Buddhism as well. As Charles Hallisey reminds us, developments similar to those which shaped modern Sinhala Buddhism also transformed Thai Buddhism, even without the twofold influences of colonial domination and Christian proselytism (Hallisey 1995: 48).

Nonetheless, if the invention of Buddhism as a world religion was not the exclusive enterprise of colonial outsiders, it remains that for centuries 'Buddhists' had not interpreted what they were doing as practicing 'Buddhism,' as they had no need for such a reified category. Hence, Buddhists had no word that could be glossed as 'Buddhism' or as 'religion' for that matter. The vernacular field of Buddhism as religion was formulated only in the nineteenth century. Previously, it was understood as something one did, not something one believed and one can surmise that it was under the dominance of the Western concept of religion that Buddhism became a commitment to a set of propositions rather than rituals (Josephson 2006). Casting the teachings and practices derived from the word of the Buddha as 'Buddhism,' which was in turn categorized as a 'religion,' allowed the Buddhist faithful to establish themselves as members of an inclusive and unified religious community on equal footing with the adherents of other religions. At the same time, by reducing the

[17] It is worth noting that Annie Besant, who would later succeed Olcott as president of the Theosophical Society, published in 1902 a Hindu catechism entitled *Sanātana Dharma Catechism. A Catechism for Boys and Girls in Hindu Religion and Morals* (Besant 1902).

[18] He was instrumental in Anagarika Dharmapala's decision to reform Buddhism with an emphasis on its spirituality and worldwide import.

gap between the monks (*sangha*) and the laity, this new terminology provided a novel vision of a common Buddhist identity. This indigenization of the category religion has been investigated most particularly in Ceylon.

The Sinhalese terms used by Buddhists to refer to their religious life originally had very specific and particularistic meanings. Such were *bauddha-samaya* ('Buddhist views,' and by extension 'the Buddhist community') and *buddhasāsana* ('instruction, admonition of the Buddha') (Carter 1977: 264–270; see Southwold 1978, Carter 1993 and Scott 1996). *Sāsana* was the term that Sinhala Buddhists most commonly used to refer to the precepts they followed. It seems that in the course of time it came to designate both an established system of teachings and the institution that promoted it. Sometime in the nineteenth century, the word *āgama*[19] was chosen by Christian missionaries as the vernacular equivalent of religion. Referring to Christianity as *kristiyāni āgama*, they named the 'religion of the Buddha' *buddhāgama*. Later on, this name gained acceptance among the Sinhala Buddhists as a term of self-reference (Malalgoda 1997: 56). As a religion, *buddhāgama* was then commensurable with other religions, while *sāsana* was conceived as *sui generis*—just like *dharma* had been in India before becoming the Hindu equivalent of religion. Henceforth, the Sinhala Buddhists began to consider themselves as having a religion of their own, with clear boundaries marking it off from other religions. Thus, one notices the occurrence of the terms *buddhāgama* and *kristiyāni āgama* in vernacular texts documenting debates that occurred in the 1860s and 1870s between representatives of the Buddhist and the Christian communities. Eventually, in the 1880s, the compound *āgamadharma* became used in the sense of a system of teaching (*dharma*) based on canonical texts (*āgama*).[20]

To summarize, when colonial Orientalists and Christian missionaries began to inquire into the 'religions' they termed 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism,' they were faced with a perplexing discrepancy between

---

[19] According to Carter (1993: 17), '*Āgama* is an old Sanskrit and Pāli word. Its basic meaning is 'coming, approach, arrival,' and it is used also to mean 'that which has come down to the present' in the sense of tradition preserved in writing. Through this extension the term means also 'religious text,' 'authoritative text' and, further, 'established procedure, discipline.'

[20] If Buddhism shares with Hinduism the notion of *dharma*, its significance is markedly different. As mentioned earlier, Brahman ethics relate specifically to the position of birth, that is, to one's own exclusive *dharma*. On the contrary, Buddhist ethics are supposedly universal and require not only proper behavior but proper motivation as well.

scriptural doctrine and sociological reality. That is to say, a disjuncture existed between what Hindus and Buddhists actually practiced and believed in daily life, on the one hand, and what their 'canonical' scriptures prescribed, on the other. The prevailing Protestant assumptions of these early European observers, which ascribed primacy to textual sources, predisposed them to systematically de-value what local people effectively did and to deny that it had any place in 'true religion.' Regarding Hinduism and Buddhism as systems of beliefs and practices that function according to the model of Christianity, and consequently expecting 'Hindu' and 'Buddhist' to be exclusive identities, they deemed these religions corrupt, forming only a thin veneer over indigenous 'spirit cults.' These views were internalized by indigenous reformers as an encompassing frame of reference within which they reinterpreted their past practices and cosmologies as respective enactments of 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism.' They endeavored further to make their newly devised 'religion' conform to the Christian conception of what a religion should be by presenting themselves as members of one exclusivist religious community relative to others. As a result, whereas formerly Buddhism had been primarily a soteriology and Hinduism a social system allowing numerous alternative soteriologies, both would henceforth be conceptualized and institutionalized as providing for all the social and soteriological needs of their adherents (Gellner 1999).

The Process of 'Religionization'

Thus, if it is indeed true that 'religion' was not a vernacular category, it has become so as a consequence of the colonial encounter and broader Western political and epistemological domination across the world, which induced the native interlocutors of Orientalists, administrators and missionaries to invent for themselves the idea that they too had a proper religion. In the words of Daniel Dubuisson: 'The West did not only conceive the idea of *religion*, it has constrained other cultures to speak of their own religions by inventing them for them' (2003: 93). As a result, scholars of religion today deal with peoples who consider themselves to 'have a religion.'

What remains thus to be investigated is the dialogic process by which non-Western peoples appropriate that foreign category for their own purposes. How is it that peoples identify themselves in terms of their 'religion,' whether motivated by the active desire to have a religion or constrained to demonstrate that they profess one? How and why has religion become such