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The Circularity in Defining Religion

A Reply to Shaul Magid

Kocku von Stuckrad

Colonialism, Monotheism, and Spirituality

A Response to Kocku von Stuckrad

Shaul Magid

Religion is often its own worst enemy. While it is associated with the potential to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place, religion often becomes that which solidifies borders of separation, reifying difference. Religion serves as one of the most potent collective exemplars of transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized orderings of society. Yet it is also largely an imperialistic project, particular to the modern West. Religion often claims to serve as a genealogical bridge connecting origin with telos, beginning with purpose. Yet it is a distinctively modern framework through which individuals and communities connect themselves to the past and envision a future. Religion distinguishes itself from “spirituality” in that, while the latter is often singular, and quietist, the former often contains social formations meant to solidify collectivity (i.e., ritual) and to construct a hierarchical message of preference (i.e., election) and soteriological vision of the future (i.e., redemption). It often functions, however, to separate those within from those without while at the same time offering a universal vision of a future where divisions collapse in ways that prove its claims about itself. While God often functions as part of, sometimes the apex of, religion, God’s place in religion often serves as a placeholder for an indecipherable and undetermined (and undeterminable) telos. Religion is thus an expression of unknowing often veiled by the guise of the unknowable.

—Shaul Magid

The Circularity in Defining Religion: A Reply to Shaul Magid

Kocku von Stuckrad

This is a thoughtful description of the antinomies of religion. Indeed, the phenomenon we call religion is riddled with paradoxes. On closer inspection, though, it may turn out that the paradoxes Magid pinpoints, making religion “its own worst enemy,” are in fact the result of a reification of *a certain form* of religion, the characteristics of which are then turned into its *general* features. The people who define religion in their various professions (such as scholars of religion, theologians, lawyers, politicians, artists, writers, journalists, as well as practitioners of all walks of life) are themselves part of this process of reification—and sometimes its countermovement. So when Magid says religion “is associated with” something, the question arises “By whom?” Many of the antinomies Magid mentions may simply be juxtapositions between a claim that representatives of some influential religions make about their own tradition and the perceptions of people who analyze that tradition from a distance. Only if we merge those two perceptions into something that “religion does” will an antinomy seem to emerge. If instead we compare the claims of some religious traditions with how the activities of their adherents manifest in historical developments, perhaps we need no longer speak of inherent antinomies. Rather, we may then address the question of why these religious claims have gained such influential currency in the first place, and why we today think that these are characteristics of religion in general.

By doing so, we will also stop attributing agency to religion. Religion doesn’t do anything; religion cannot “distinguish itself from” anything, be it spirituality or something else, and it also cannot “claim” anything, as Magid’s sentence seems to suggest. We need to formulate carefully here because the agency is not in religion; the agency is in the people who present religion as such, who distinguish and who make claims. It is the (im)balance of the power to define and classify that creates the antinomies Magid recognizes.

In a way, we are confronted here with what I like to call the circularity in defining religion. To explain what I mean, let me unpack Magid’s paradoxes one by one.

Singularization of Religion

Magid correctly observes that there is a striking tension between the idea that religions have the potential “to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place” on the one hand, and the solidification of borders of separation and the reification of difference that these religions demonstrate. The same is true for the tension between the alleged “transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized orderings of society” and the strong imperialistic tendency that religions often entail. When he notes that this is a project “particular to the modern West,” Magid already hints at an important differentiation that may help us better understand this seeming paradox. What he describes as religion here is the product of a specific discourse that “singularized” religion on the basis of what was understood as Christianity and, to a lesser extent, as monotheistic religion. The concept of singularization of religion was introduced by Burkhard Gladigow (2002; see also Kippenberg, Rüpke, and von Stuckrad 2009: 127–338) to distinguish the dominant discourse from the “concurrent alternatives” in European history of religion. Scholars of religion have pointed out that religious communities can of course also adhere to a local, tribal, and monolingual identity. We may think, for instance, of J. Z. Smith’s influential distinction between locative and utopian types of religion (introduced with some hesitation in Smith 1978: 101). But the “utopian” extension of the borders of territory, tribe, and language was strongly associated with Christianity, a religion that was subsequently reified by theologians, politicians, lawyers, and scholars of religion as the standard and most universal model of religion.

The singularization of religion began in late antiquity with the rise of Christianity as the “only true” religion; it was in that period, too, that Christian theologians and lawyers introduced the idea that a person can have only one religion (an idea that was alien to Roman law and culture, as it is alien today in many regions outside of Europe; see Zander 2016). Such an understanding survived the Reformation, which otherwise led to a restructuring of societal orders of religion, and it was still instrumental in the formation of modern constitutional democracies. Under European law, it is impossible to be formally Protestant and Catholic, Anglican and Jewish, Muslim and Lutheran, or what have you, at the same time. This is singularization of religion reified and sanctified in constitutional laws.

The same reification also led to the idea that there is something wrong when people adhere to “conflicting beliefs,” such as going to church on Sunday and

attending Zen meditation on Tuesday; such behavior—although it has been the norm not only in “modernity”—is routinely pathologized as the “super-market of religions,” “bricolage,” “pick-and-choose religion,” “individualized religion,” and so on. This is precisely what Magid calls “the solidification of borders of separation and the reification of difference”; however, this is not a feature inherent in “religion” but rather the result of a specific European (and subsequently North American) understanding of Christian religion that is indeed the prototype of a transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized form of “proper” religion. One reason for its success has been its coherence with the European colonial expansions from the fifteenth century onward, which on the military, political, and cultural levels mirrored the same extensions of tribe, territory, and language that were subsequently associated with religion. In short, internally, pluralistic religious alternatives in Europe were pathologized; externally, the non-Christian alternatives found outside of Europe were categorized as the Other of “true” religion.

Grand Narratives of Origin and Future

It is this singularized religion that also “often claims to serve as a genealogical bridge” between an imagined beginning and a vision of the future. But is this really a “distinctively modern framework” of interpretation, as Magid claims? Isn’t it already a feature of early Christianity, a religion that hosts an apocalyptic reading of salvation history as one of its core principles? It seems that some further exploration is necessary here. To begin with, what religious communities offer their members is a meaningful narrative about their place in space and time. This doesn’t need to be teleological, though. In some cases these narratives and practices simply order the relationship between a human community and nonhuman agents such as gods, spirits, or the natural world (examples would include many Greek and Roman religions and many indigenous traditions, but also new forms of religious practices today, such as Paganism). So what could be the “distinctively modern” element here? Maybe it is the emergence of new and sometimes competing narratives of origin and telos in Europe since the eighteenth century. One example is the idea of the nation. As Benedict Anderson (1983) famously noted more than thirty-five years ago, the nation is an “imagined community” built on a compelling narrative of origin and future, among other things. For Anderson, nationalism is not the successor of religion, but

nationalism thrives on the discursive structures that religious narratives provide, combined with economic and political changes in the nineteenth century (for updated readings of his theory, see Blok, Kuitenbrouwer, and Weeda 2018).

This is also in line with Max Weber's assertion that the "disenchantment" of the world would lead not to a decline of religion but to the emergence of new providers of meaning; the rise of nationalism is but one example of that. Another example is the rise of scientific narratives of origin and telos. These narratives have different names today, including the "Epic of Evolution," the "Story/Journey of the Universe," and "Big History." In her study of "mythopoetic science," Lisa H. Sideris (2017: 5) notes that whatever their names, these narratives have something in common: they "define humans as the part of the universe that has become conscious of itself. Humans' dawning geological consciousness, combined with empirical knowledge of nature, will enable us to guide the future unfolding of the cosmic process, allowing our species to live in greater intimacy and harmony with the Earth."

If we follow Magid's characterization of religion as offering a bridge between a mythical past and an envisioned future, the examples of nationalism and science indicate that, at least for contemporary societies (not only) in Europe and North America, it doesn't make sense to limit religion to the traditional institutionalized forms of religious communities. Other systems provide similar narratives, a fact that is both evidence of the overwhelming discursive power of the Christian narrative and of a competing structure that has emerged from the same background. How does Magid's idea of religion relate to that?

Religion and Spirituality

When Magid writes that "[r]eligion distinguishes itself from 'spirituality,'" we may again ask: Who is this agent called religion? And again, rather than personifying religion as an agent, we should identify the human actors and the context in which they actually propagate a distinction between religion and spirituality. These are usually not the representatives of traditional "religious" institutions, such as Christianity or Judaism. Instead, the distinction between religion and spirituality has become an increasingly common feature outside of the established religious communities in North America

and Europe since the 1960s (hence the subtitle of Fuller 2001: *Understanding Unchurched America*). When many people today use the slogan “I’m spiritual but not religious,” they offer their implicit definition of religion, from which the idea of spirituality is derived. In 1975, Charles T. Tart, a leading representative of the transpersonal movement—which had a huge influence on the emergence of this new discourse on spirituality (see von Stuckrad 2019a: ch. 6)—spoke for many others when he noted:

I use the term “spiritual” in preference to “religious” because I feel the former term implies more directly the *experiences* that people have about the meaning of life, God, ways to live, etc., while “religious” implies too strongly the enormous social structures that embrace so many more things than direct spiritual experience, and which have often become hostile to and inhibiting of direct experience. When I hear “religious,” I get all sorts of associations of priests, dogmas, doctrines, churches, institutions, political meddling, and social organizations. (Tart 1975: 7, italics in original)

Today this distinction between spirituality and religion seems to have become even more pronounced. Anecdotally, let me mention a piece of graffiti spotted in a Berlin restaurant in 2019 that simply proclaims, “Religion kills! Spirituality saves!!!” (von Stuckrad 2019b). Many scholars of religion have followed the preferences of their interlocutors; they avoid “religion” and prefer to talk of “nature-based spiritualities,” “spiritual practices,” and so on. This does not mean that “spirituality” would solve the definitional problems of “religion”; it indicates only how much academic discourses intersect with the discourses outside of the academy.

Hence, Magid is certainly right when he directs our attention to the different constructions of religion and spirituality. But is this also indicative of a paradox? While many proponents of spirituality would insist that their way of conversing with the more-than-human world is fundamentally different from what established religions do, many of them also offer universal visions of the future, solidify collectivity, and construct a hierarchical order that distinguishes between “insiders” and “outsiders.” What is more, many communities in the field of spirituality have gone through processes of institutionalization on various levels (from the Theosophical Society to the Foundation for Shamanic Studies to the Pagan Federation). I don’t see a paradox or antinomy here. What I see are different groups of people entertaining

different understandings of religion. A paradox seems to emerge only if we mash those different groups into one. Put differently, is it possible that the distinction between spirituality and religion is an example of false binaries and that for our analysis we have to insist on the importance of differentiation and maintaining complexity, which renders either of the two terms unhelpful?

God and the Unknown

It is noteworthy that Magid identifies reflection on God (capital G) as a central element of religion. Often, he states, God “functions as part of, sometimes the apex of, religion.” At the same time—and this is another paradox Magid pinpoints—God is ultimately unknowable, and thus a “placeholder for an indecipherable and undetermined (and undeterminable) telos.” Where does Magid’s conviction come from? It derives from a long history of philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of the divine: the Neoplatonic idea of a *deus absconditus*, a god who is ineffable, inconceivable, infinite, and transcendent, which strongly influenced European thinking from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. One of the cornerstones of Jewish (and subsequently Christian) Kabbalah was the riddle of knowledge of the divine: How can we know what is hidden from us, and how can we understand the concealed wisdom of God based on the revealed knowledge of Torah? However, Kabbalistic inquiry was not restricted to religious or metaphysical questions. It had implications for the human understanding of nature and history, providing a scientific “reading” of the cosmos that left its strong mark on philosophical systems interested in unlocking the ultimate secrets of the world. Hegel’s idea of the *Weltgeist* (World Spirit) that “unfolds” in history and comes to completion in the final understanding of human history is just another twist of the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun* and the philosophical-mystical telos of history.

There can be no doubt about the enormous influence of this conceptualization on European thinking. But does this allow us to postulate that religion is “an expression of unknowing often veiled by the guise of the unknowable”? It seems to me that this makes sense only if we identify “religion” with Neoplatonic mystical Christian and Jewish speculation about the divine (and its philosophical derivatives). This assertion disregards philosophical

and religious ideas and practices in Europe and North America—Gladigow’s “concurrent alternatives”—that (often polemically) break away from such an obsession with the transcendent divine. Examples include the nature-based spiritualities and materialist ontologies that have flourished since the nineteenth century. It also disregards religious traditions outside of Europe that do not buy into such a metaphysical conceptualization. Indigenous religion(s), arguably constituting the majority of religions worldwide (Harvey 2017: 77), often conceptualize the more-than-human world not in terms of a transcendent and unknowable god but in terms of place, kinship, and ancestry; talking of “indigenous” thus addresses “the relationship between people and place, emphasizing the distinctive sense that indigenous peoples typically highlight their relationships with specific lands” (Harvey 2017: 78). In these cosmologies and practices, there simply is no place for a *deus absconditus*. Why, then, do we continue to prioritize a definition of religion that is so indebted to Christian and Jewish conceptions of spirituality and the divine?

The Circularity in Defining Religion

As we know, the concept of religion gained its particular meaning in European cultural discourse. Through processes of colonial encounter and global entanglements, the concept has been adapted to non-European contexts as well, which in turn caused reverberations that influenced and changed the understanding of the term in Europe. Many critics have pointed out that the European concept of religion has been an accomplice of power and a means of legitimizing colonial rule. The question then arises as to whether it is still possible to use the term “religion” as a generic concept. I hope my response to Magid has demonstrated the challenges that the generalization of a local concept into a universal one entails. Therefore, I agree that “religion is often its own worst enemy,” but in a different sense than Magid has it. The antinomies and paradoxes he detects in religion, I argue, nearly disappear as soon as we contextualize them within the discursive framework of European history. Thus it also becomes apparent that these general assumptions about religion are a universalization of specific—although influential—regional ideas that can be traced back mainly to Christian thought and practice. Indeed, we are confronted with a circular construct of religion here: the specific idea of religion in European discourse is turned into a generic understanding,

subsequently making it impossible to identify something as “religion” unless it matches these universalized criteria.

There is no way back to an “innocent” use of the term “religion.” The circular structure of its definition confronts us with a challenge similar to the one Audre Lorde (1984: 112) famously (and controversially) addressed with regard to racism and homophobia: “[T]he master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” To bring about genuine change in the study of religion, we would need to either use the term “religion” in a regional way that has no generic aspirations and avoids any universalization or find contextually appropriate terms to better depict the ideas and practices we are interested in. Otherwise, I’m afraid religion will remain its own worst enemy.

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Colonialism, Monotheism, and Spirituality: A Response to Kocku von Stuckrad

Shaul Magid

I want to thank Kocku von Stuckrad for this thoughtful response to my contribution to this volume. His challenges, questions, and critiques certainly move us forward in thinking about the term “religion” we scholars use to define a phenomenon of human collective and individual meaning-making.

I certainly agree with von Stuckrad that the term “religion” itself carries heavy baggage that even, or perhaps precisely, scholars often succumb to in their desire to transcend it. As a scholar of Judaism and religions in what used to be called “the West,” I can certainly acknowledge my inability to fully extricate myself from the categorical limitations of my subject. Von Stuckrad is correct in taking me to task for that limitation, if only to enable me to see beyond it.

Here I would like to reflect on three points, two that von Stuckrad mentions explicitly and one alluded to in his critique of the “Christianized” version of religion that seems all too often to stand in for that dubious locution the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” The first is colonialism, the second is monotheism, and the third is spirituality. There is no doubt in my mind, and here von Stuckrad and I agree, that “religion” as a term is an appendage of (Christian) European colonialism and, even as it is often used by scholars today, can retain certain colonial resonance.

Thus, as von Stuckrad writes, one can have only “one religion,” and quite often the legitimacy of that one religion is that it acknowledges only “one” God. The colonial nature of monotheism itself has been discussed by others. And in addition, as Jared Diamond (1997) showed in his *Guns Germs, and Steel*, monolingualistic societies, and perhaps one could add monotheistic ones as well, are far better at using the collective force of the “one” (language or God) to progress more quickly and expand more forcefully than multilingual cultures, or perhaps “polytheistic” ones. I put scare quotes around “polytheistic” because that too is a category invented by monotheists and thus is also colonialist. No religion calls itself polytheistic; they are labeled as such only by their monotheistic opponents. So polytheism is only a negative appellation, perhaps until very recently when it was taken over by

contemporary self-described pagan communities as an expression of rebellion against the connection between monotheism and patriarchy (Daly 1973; Frymer-Kensky 1993).

There is an apocryphal saying of the Hasidic master known as the Kotzker Rebbe (a saying likely fabricated from something now lost). Describing the midrash that Abraham destroyed all the idols in his father's house, the Kotzker Rebbe claimed that Abraham forgot to destroy one last idol: the idol of monotheism. The claim that "revelation" itself can become an idol, or "Jewish law/halakha" can become an idol, is common fare among some scholars of Judaism, and even some practitioners. My point, I suppose, is to ask: Can we, should we, must we, simply move beyond "monotheism," certainly as a template of what we call "religion" or "true religion," if we are get to a deeper rendering of this complex term outside its colonialist context? How endemic is it to our understanding of "religion" such that non-monotheisms may be something, but they are not quite religion?

Let me offer an example. In 1959 a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor named Oswald Rufeisen who had converted to Catholicism during the war and was now a monk applied to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return (which enables Jews to automatically become citizens). His request was denied by the Ministry of the Interior because he had converted to Christianity, even though he continued to consider himself ethnically a Jew. Rufeisen challenged the decision in the Israeli Supreme Court, which in 1961 adjudicated in favor of the lower court's ruling, denying him entry under the Law of Return but allowing him to immigrate under the statute of Righteous Gentiles. That is, under Israeli secular law, converting to another "religion" erases one's status as a "Jew." Interestingly, the Israeli Rabbinate disagreed and sided with halakhic precedent that "[a] Jew who sins is still a Jew" even if he converts to another religion. That is, according to most traditional legal authorities, one cannot convert "out" of Judaism or "out" of Jewishness, which then questions whether Judaism is even a religion at all. This is upheld by most classical adjudicators except perhaps Moses Maimonides (twelfth-century Egypt). The Supreme Court's decision was upheld; Rufeisen immigrated as a "righteous gentile" and lived at the Stella Maris monastery in Haifa until he died in 1998 (Magid 2020). This became the landmark "Who is a Jew?" case in Israel.

This classic case of "Who is a Jew?" is relevant to our concerns because scholars have asked after the fact whether this would have been the decision had Rufeisen become a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Jain. The courts noted in

their decision that Christianity's history of persecution of Jews played a role in their deliberations, but the question still stands: What would the courts think of a Jew converting to a non-monotheistic religion in regard to the Law of Return? Would they consider such act an erasure of one's Jewishness or an abandonment of Judaism? Can one be a Jewish Buddhist but not a Jewish Christian (which Rufeisen claimed he was)? In fact, the whole notion of conversion does not usually apply to religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism but only to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that is, competing monotheistic religions. There are many Jewish Buddhists—they even have a name, JewBu (Sigalow 2019)—and no one I know is claiming they are no longer Jews.

If we say the reason is that Judaism, and here we might add Christianity and Islam, does not consider these other religions truly "religions" (even though we may refer to them as such in the classroom), what does that say about the term "religion" more generally? The colonial enterprise was in part about "civilizing," that is, Christianizing, the "uncivilized," but here we can say more generally that it was about giving them "religion." This can be said of the Muslim conquests as well. For Christianity, Judaism and Islam may be the wrong religions, even false religions, but they are still "religions." While historically Judaism did not missionize the way Christianity and Islam did, it certainly viewed both Christianity and Islam as "false religions" and, in many cases, regarded Christianity as idolatrous. But still "religion." Not so with non-monotheistic religions, which were viewed as something, but not quite "religion," which may be one reason why in Judaism one doesn't "convert" into them. Jews, Christians, and Muslims often considered these other "religions" idolatrous, which begs the question whether they considered them religions at all. For example, regarding the Rufeisen case, if he had become a Hindu, he may have been considered an "idolater" to many Jews but may still have been able to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return. We scholars may now call these non-monotheistic or even nontheistic religions "religion," but in doing so are we still in some way wed to the colonialist discourse that is deeply embedded in the "Judeo-Christian" formulation?

In short, is monotheism a problem for scholars of religion? By "problem" I don't mean, of course, is monotheism true or false? That is certainly not a scholarly question but relevant only for adepts. I refer rather to monotheism as a construct that arguably gave birth to the very idea of "religion" itself and the way it has been used, certainly through the Enlightenment.

The question of "religion" versus "spirituality" that von Stuckrad and I engage in is certainly one that requires closer scrutiny. Ever since

Robert Fuller made the dichotomy popular with his book *Spiritual but Not Religious* in 2001, people have grabbed hold of “spirituality” as a life-line after becoming unmoored from religious institutions. I agree with von Stuckrad that the dichotomous terms are far more complex than they seem. For example, wasn’t Abraham being “spiritual” by rebelling against his father’s idolatry, and wasn’t Jesus being “spiritual” in his critique of the religion of his day, that is, a society—can we call it a religion?—itself built on the foundations of Abraham’s “spiritual” rebellion? In short, is “spirituality” nothing more than an immanent critique of religion that then itself *becomes* religion, thereby evoking another “spiritual” critique? Gershom Scholem argued similarly in his historiography of Kabbalah, and one could say the same of Martin Luther and Thomas Merton and the Berrigan brothers. Those who wave the banner of “spiritual but not religious” want to believe their spirituality is not religious, but since it was born *from* religion, *to* religion it will return. It is just a matter of time. If this is true, then spiritualism as critique is a necessary tool of religious progress, but it cannot easily sustain itself. We can say that it steps temporarily outside religion by rejecting it (spiritual *but not* religious), but that very stepping outside has a long history in, and of, religion itself.

Part of that is the collective component. Collective spiritualities or spiritual critiques that create community often, perhaps inevitably, fold into something resembling religion. When von Stuckrad cites Charles Tart, who writes, “[W]hen I hear ‘religious’ I get all sorts of associations of priests, dogmas, doctrines, churches institutions, political meddling, and social organizations” (Tart 1975: 7) he is making a point of distinction, but how deep does that distinction go? Is religion simply an organized form, or the petering out, of spirituality? Or perhaps a byproduct of spirituality before it gets undermined by a new spiritual critique? I think keeping these two terms (“spiritual” and “religious”) operative is a good thing, if only to enable us to see that religion never avoids an immanent critique of itself for long. People want “religion,” but they also are repelled by it. It shapes societies and often destroys individuals. Spirituality might be the ticket out of religion, but it never goes very far. And here we need to consider how secularism can also function as a “spiritual” critique of religion, the very term “enlightenment” harks back to religious language: one rendering of the term *Bahir* (the title of a twelfth-century Kabbalistic work) and of *Zohar* (the title of a thirteenth-century Kabbalistic work) is “Enlightenment.” And, of course, Novalis called the ostensibly atheistic Spinoza “God intoxicated.”

Perhaps the “spiritual *but not* religious” is best operative in an ostensibly neutral, that is, secular space that more easily enables meaning-making to happen outside the confines of the church. Kabbalists and spiritualists of old may have been attuned to “spiritual” as critique but not as easily able to buy into the “but not” bridge that both cuts spiritual from religious and connects them. To be “spiritual *but not* religious” is thus a temporal space, a critical space, and may require a secular space, “between” that which is severed from, but also deeply connected to, what it attempts to subvert. The more successful it is, the more quickly it will resemble religion.

Scholars of religion arguably require both terms to more broadly navigate the meaning-making we call “religion.” Spirituality is, on this reading, religion’s other, but also its prehistory and its destiny. It cannot survive intact perhaps because Aristotle’s notion of the human as a “political animal” also includes religion as part of the “political,” not in a formal sense but rather in a structural one. This of course comes close to Talal Asad’s (1993) notion of the secular more generally, and for good reason. The secular can also sometimes function as a kind of “spiritualism” when its critique is primarily structural rather than purely substantive, when it’s fighting for an alternative vision of human flourishing rather than simply a neutral space for human agency.

Finally, I agree with von Stuckrad that religion is caught in a kind of circularity and that viewing it within its European colonial history helps us fight against the propensity for reification. But it is also worth considering that using these categories of analysis—“religion,” “spirituality,” “God,” “monotheism,” “polytheism,” etc.—can be useful if critically applied, if only because that is how many people who claim to live inside these terms and categories define themselves. So while J. Z. Smith may be right that “religion” is created “in the scholar’s study,” to understand it we must read texts and observe those for whom, to borrow another of Smith’s locutions, “religion, religions, religious” remain operative forms of human self-fashioning.

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