

April 5, 2005

16 RELIGION, ETHNICITY, THE NATION

Read: Aihwa Ong, 1990 *State versus Islam: Malay families, women's bodies, and the body politic in Malaysia.*

Malarney, Shaun Kingsley, 1996. *The limits of "state functionalism" and the reconstruction of funerary ritual in contemporary northern Vietnam.*

I. Introduction: anthropological views about religion

A. Religion is seen as part of culture, a component of a particular cultural system

1. In the ideal type of culture, each "culture" has a "religion"
 - a. "Ideal" here doesn't mean "the best;" rather, a model is constructed to serve as a heuristic—an aid to thinking about culture
 - b. Ideal types are never found in the real world
2. For example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote an ethnography, *The Nuer* about people in southern Sudan
 - a. Followed it with *Nuer Religion*
3. Similarly, in the U.S. Southwest, the Navajo people practice the Navajo religion
 - a. Here we have an approximation to the ideal type:
 - b. A close association with a group of people who identify themselves as a distinct culture with a distinct language
 - c. It's difficult to imagine what Navajo religion could be if someone who doesn't speak Navajo believed in it and practiced it

B. In the real world religions are linked to culture (in the sense of "a culture"), nation, and ethnicity in more complicated fashion

1. Example of world religions
2. They complicate this way of thinking, as they are shared by many cultures, no matter how you define "culture"
 - a. Islam in Nigeria very different from Islam in Indonesia

3. To be successful such major religions must have a core set of meanings, symbols and practices that adapt fairly easily to different cultural contexts
 - a. Faint echoes of the original culture will remain
 - b. Because all world religions began in a single culture
 - c. There will be premises, assumptions, and sometimes language from the original culture
 - 1) That religious scholars will focus on
 - 2) Scholars will grapple with such too-restricted assumptions and language, trying to make them relevant to other cultural contexts
 - d. Traces in Christianity and early Judaism?
 - 1) The lists approved-of practices and beliefs in the Bible that are no longer acceptable is extensive
 - 2) **Discuss:** examples?
 - 3) Polygyny, stoning to death, slaves, witches
 - e. **Discuss:** Traces of the origins of Islam remaining among the Hui?
4. Another influence: concepts and practices from cultural systems that existed in between the original cultural context and the present
 - a. Many Orthodox Jewish practices that stem from Central European communities over the last few centuries
 - b. Clothing; shaving the bride's head at marriage and donning a wig
5. There will be stronger connections between the culture that existed at the beginning of the religion and the present-day culture if it's in the same locale
 - a. But this varies as well
 - b. Islam in the Middle East
 - c. Judaism in Israel

- d. Both religions developed in pastoralist (herding as well as agriculture), arid societies
- C. Missionaries, of course, proselytizing a religion, encounter difficulties when working among members of a very different culture
 - 1. The elderly nun interviewed in the video “Stolen Generations” says that early on she hadn’t known that God was in the Aborigines long before the whites came to Australia
 - a. One must have a particular notion (a very ecumenical and abstract) of God to be able to believe this
- D. Local variants of world religions can resemble the one-culture-one-religion model a bit more
 - 1. Greek, Russian Orthodox
 - 2. “Irish Catholic,” “Irish wake”
 - a. The image evoked is very different from the image of an Italian wake
 - b. Although both are Catholic
 - c. And anyone can become a Catholic
 - 3. Tibet is perhaps the best example
 - a. Tibetan religion is a local variant of a world religion (Buddhism)
 - 1) But a very strong conflation of religion, culture, politics has developed there
 - 2) Is a theocracy (the Dalai Lama is seen to be both the religious and political leader)
- E. Some world religions are seen to “belong” to certain populations
 - 1. Even though they are practiced in many countries
 - 2. Judaism
 - a. Even though the aggregate of people who self-identify as Jews shows enormous physical variation

- b. Sammy Davis, an African-American entertainer
 - c. Converted to Judaism
 - d. It was seen as odd
 - e. Ethiopian Jews who migrated to Israel—Falashi—are seen as “odd” as well
 - f. There is an association made between religion, culture, and “looking Jewish”¹
 - g. Notions of Jewishness as raced can be quite pronounced among some categories of Jews
 - h. So there will be rulings, for instance, about organ transplants
 - i. Susan Kahn’s book on the employment of new reproductive technologies in Israel²
 - 1) Is a fascinating study of the centrality of reproduction in Judaism and Jewish culture
 - 2) The state makes such treatments available to all Israelis, even unmarried secular women
 - j. Whereas “he doesn’t look Catholic”—what would that mean?
3. A very different example: young Americans who followed South Asian gurus
- a. In the 1970s
 - b. Hare Krishna, Rajneesh
 - c. Evoked laughter because their bodies didn’t seem to belong in the saffron-colored robes, their shaved heads looked odd
 - d. Hinduism, although practiced in many countries
 - 1) Is quite linked to India: not really a world religion
4. Many religions alter the body by inscribing religious symbols onto it

¹ See Sander Gilman, 1991. *The Jew’s Body*. New York: Routledge.

² Kahn, Susan Martha, 2000. *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- a. Circumcision of Jewish and Muslim males
 - b. Female genital cutting in areas of northern and central Africa
 - c. Such inscriptions serve many purposes
 - 1) Constantly remind the person they are members of a moral community—can't do what they like with their bodies
 - 2) And are emblems: make the person easier to identify as a member of X culture; practitioner of X religion
- F. And some religions are found in many parts of the globe, but, like Hinduism, are not world religions
- 1. Gypsy (Roma) beliefs form part of what makes Gypsies distinct
 - 2. We can say the same for the Hutterites, an Anabaptist sect in Canada and the U.S.
 - a. Broke away from mainstream Protestant religions in Europe
 - b. Were persecuted; came to New World (like other persecuted religious minorities—the Puritans, Quakers)
 - 1) But Anabaptists chose to remain apart, some continued to speak German, Hutterites live in huge communal farms
 - c. Because of missionization, Anabaptists are found in Nicaragua, Paraguay, etc.

II. The relationship between religion and ethnic and national *identity*

- A. Cross-culturally and over time an extremely varied and complicated matter
- B. A cookie-cutter model of culture, seeing cultures as little islands, bounded, unchanging, internally homogeneous
 - 1. Doesn't work in general
 - 2. Obviously doesn't work for religions
 - 3. Even though a religion may *appear* to be fairly straightforwardly linked to a nationality and a locality

- a. Example of Tibetan religion
 - b. But if it is studied over time we have to understand the spread of Buddhism, etc.
 - c. Look at the fame of the current Dalai Lama; what he represents, who his followers are
 - 1) He visited MIT in 2003; conference with a panel of scientists
- C. Despite obstacles, studying the relationship between religion, nation and ethnicity (and, sometimes, race) is crucial
- 1. Even though it is so varied and complex
 - 2. Because it so often is extremely important
- III. Remember our definition of ethnicity and nationality as relationships?
- A. Certainly religion can be seen in such relationship terms as well
- 1. How a given religion is born, how it evolves
 - 2. Depends on its relationship with other religions it is in contact with
 - 3. As well as the relationships between the cultures, societies of its adherents and non-adherents
- B. Example: The Hui see themselves as Muslim in some fashion (even the ones who are not practicing Muslims)
- 1. And part of their nationality identity connects them to Arabia via their religious beliefs
 - a. An identity that in this respect is not-China in the sense of not-Han
 - b. Certainly they are Chinese citizens
 - c. But it's more complicated, and certainly has changed over time
 - 2. **Discuss:** provide an example of an ethnicity or nationality that doesn't evoke religion at all
- C. Example: the relationship between colonized people and the colonizers

1. Colonial powers have greatly influenced, over time, the nature of the religion(s) practiced in their colonies
 - a. The Tibetan religion and nationalism changed as a result of occupation by PRC
 - 1) Here local religion is a sign of resistance
 - 2) Happens often
2. Religions may be introduced by colonizers
 - a. Conversion coerced
 - 1) The Inca empire, when it overtook other societies
 - 2) African slaves in the U.S. and Caribbean
 - b. Or voluntarily adopted (Christianity, Islam in many parts of the world)

D. Transnational movement affects religious observance

1. Buddhist Koreans converted to Christianity in substantial numbers when immigrated to U.S. and Canada

IV. “New religions”

A. Of interest to us because so important in ethnic, national processes

1. All “new religions” draw on already existing religious components—symbolism, ritual, etc.

B. New religions may spring up in response to changes, pressures, oppression

1. Christianity: ancient Israel was a colony of Imperial Rome
2. Among Iroquois in New York state and Canada, the Handsome Lake revitalization movement is an example
3. As is the Ghost Dance adopted by Plains Indians
4. **Discuss:** other examples?
 - a. Nation of Islam in the US

5. Some “new religions” are short-lived
 - a. Cargo cults in the Pacific
- C. Another kind of “new” religion:
1. Is a blend of two or more “old” religions
 2. Called syncretistic religions
 - a. Come about through forces of creolization, amalgamation, assimilation
 - b. Santería in this country
 - 1) Combination of Yoruba and Spanish Catholicism
 - 2) With concomitant associations with certain Hispanic groups
 - c. *Voudoun* in Haiti another example
 - 1) Combination of West African and French Catholicism
 - 2) Now serves as a symbol of the Haitian people
 - 3) Similar religions in other countries have different names: Macumba, Candomblé in Brazil
- D. Religions that claim to be “rational”
1. Scientology
 2. “Rational,” secular states that see religious practice as old-fashioned, not modern
 - a. Article by Malarney
 - b. They promote the philosophies/ideologies that undergird them as replacements for religion
 - c. “Cult” of Mao Tse Tung
- E. Another type are religions that claim to be reviving old, extinct religions
1. Wicca (witchcraft) in the U.S. and England

- a. No major association with a current ethnic group, but do link themselves to a persecuted group in the past: Druids

2. Are syncretistic

V. Forces behind religious change

A. Are quite often powerfully linked to nation, ethnicity and related topics

- 1. They appear as responses to crisis, or felt needs not being met
- 2. Changes are threatening, the old religion cannot account for them
- 3. Fundamentalist movements

- a. Can, but usually don't, produce radical change

- b. An example of radical change is the Iranian revolution

4. Other less sweeping examples of "fundamentalism"?

- a. "Revitalization": the Islamic revival movement described by Ong

B. We tend to consider religions that have only recently appeared to be "cults" or "sects"

- 1. But nearly all major religions began as minority sects or cults
- 2. Example: United Church of Christ (includes Congregationalists)
 - a. Founded by radicals who wanted local governance of church
 - b. Pilgrims—had to flee
 - c. Congregationalists now seen as very liberal, loosey-goosey
 - d. But earlier as late as 1820s, they prohibited celebrations of Christmas because it's not mentioned in the Bible

C. As a religion grows and becomes established, it will become associated with the society that mainstreams it

- 1. May not be an entire nation-state, however
- 2. The source of a great deal of conflict