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The idea of "world religions" expresses a vague commitment to multiculturalism. Not merely a descriptive concept, "world religions" is actually a particular ethos, a pluralist ideology, a logic of classification, and a form of knowledge that has shaped the study of religion and infiltrated ordinary language.

In this ambitious study, Tomoko Masuzawa examines the emergence of "world religions" in modern European thought. Devoting particular attention to the relation between the comparative study of language and the nascent science of religion, she demonstrates how new classifications of language and race caused Buddhism and Islam to gain special significance, as these religions came to be seen in opposing terms-Aryan on one hand and Semitic on the other. Masuzawa also explores the complex relation of "world religions" to Protestant theology, from the hierarchical ordering of religions typical of the Christian supremacists of the nineteenth century to the aspirations of early twentieth-century theologian Ernst Troeltsch, who embraced the pluralist logic of "world religions" and by so doing sought to reclaim the universalist destiny of European modernity.

The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism Details

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From Reader Review The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism for online ebook

Kevin says

This book is a great study with a lot of valuable insights into the historical circumstances that led to the current 'world religions' discourse. I do think it is a bit on the dry side, however. This is a must read if you take seriously the study of religion.

Ceylontjaya says

Buddhism is the world First Universal religion. It is not limit to caste, nation, country or family. other two is christianity & Islam.

Maureen says

What strikes me in Masuzawa's descriptions of 19C European ideas about the development of religions is that among all thinkers, an explicit or implicit sense of the destiny of Christianity remains. While Müller criticizes his opponents' assertion that "the sublime majesty of one true God is wrested away from the religion of the monolithic, narrow, exclusivist Semites, and reassigned to the prolific, all-inclusive, universalist Aryans, and thus, by implication, to European Christianity," his own view of the development of world religions is driven by a "Darwinian" (as metaphor) teleology. His idea of the stages of languages, with their explicit hierarchy, from isolating to agglutinative to inflective, keeps us within this same idea of evolution as destiny, as inevitability.

It seems that while these scholars were claiming to solve the problem of the origins and nature of the world's religions, they were mostly only concerned with this question vis-a-vis the role of Christianity among (and in comparison to) other religions, a crisis of supremacy in the search for origins. Why else would the urge exist to separate Aryan (Hellenic, for some) Christianity from Semitic Judaism?

Rachael says

This is a critique of the very category of "World Religions," a fascinating, historical look at the forces which formed the category and challenges its relationship to lived religious experience. If you have an interest in how academic disciplines come to be in the first place, this is a nice overview of one.

Lehua says

Excellent deconstruction of the academic field of religious studies and the origins of the academic study of religion. Highly recommended as an introduction to the history of universalism and pluralism in religious studies. My favorite theory and method book.

Roger Green says

This work painstaking academic effort remains amazing a decade after publication. Masuzawa's work on Friedrich Max Müller is especially helpful as she uncovers instances of cultural amnesia and the ongoing presence of dangerous commonplaces.

Yang says

the establishment of the comparative paradigm of "world religions".

Elsie says

Didn't actually get to finish this one. Might have more than liked it. Don't know.

Emily says

The first part of the book was FASCINATING, but I found myself less interested in each chapter.

Will certainly come back to this book in the future for second or third projects, as I'm interested in the category of religion and its application to traditional Roman religions.

Sarah says

Interesting discussion of the history of "world religions." Esp. helpful contextualization of comparative philology w/re to European universalism, racial logic

Chris says

A genealogy of method in the modern study of religion is, almost by definition, a specialist's endeavor. Within that admittedly narrow frame, I found myself pretty much the target audience. Early modern fabulists! Victorian Anglo-Catholics! C19 German philologists! A concluding deconstruction of Ernst Troeltsch!! This stuff is catnip to me, and would have been even more at the end of my college career, which is ... exactly when Masuzawa published this book, actually. Like, by a matter of weeks.

One story that was new to me here, and that I found especially fascinating: The question of what makes a religion "universal" or "world". The claim, which I first encountered in Lamin Sanneh, that Christianity is uniquely "translatable", and the elision of language and culture he performs, turns out to have a long history: It's not new in missiological discourse, but rather retrieved from being buried first by European racists and then by colonial pluralists. (Would you be shocked that the word "Aryan" is all over this story?)

If either my raving or the GR book summary grabs you at all, definitely read it. Masuzawa writes much better and more accessibly than most academics; it's the subject matter, not the jargon, that's specialized. There's nothing here to spark a revolution, but there's plenty to chew on.

Rev. Linda says

A text for a Fall 2017 Brite course - From the Publisher: The idea of "world religions" expresses a vague commitment to multiculturalism. Not merely a descriptive concept, "world religions" is actually a particular ethos, a pluralist ideology, a logic of classification, and a form of knowledge that has shaped the study of religion and infiltrated ordinary language. In this ambitious study, Tomoko Masuzawa examines the emergence of "world religions" in modern European thought. Devoting particular attention to the relation between the comparative study of language and the nascent science of religion, she demonstrates how new classifications of language and race caused Buddhism and Islam to gain special significance, as these religions came to be seen in opposing terms-Aryan on one hand and Semitic on the other. Masuzawa also explores the complex relation of "world religions" to Protestant theology, from the hierarchical ordering of religions typical of the Christian supremacists of the nineteenth century to the aspirations of early twentieth-century theologian Ernst Troeltsch, who embraced the pluralist logic of "world religions" and by so doing sought to reclaim the universalist destiny of European modernity.

Joseph Sverker says

This is a very thorough study of how the concept of world religion has changed and even been invented by the scholars of religion in the 19th century. It is in many ways an eye opener in terms of how much influence the scholars themselves had on the practitioners of the religions they studied. Yet, I'm not so sure that the author is able to prove his thesis that today's pluralism is indebted to the Christian universalism and exclusivism.

Caleb Ausbury says

"This book concerns a particular aspect of the formation of modern European identity, a fairly recent history of how Europe came to self-consciousness: Europe as a harbinger of universal history, as a prototype of unity amid plurality.

The book finds its central question in the following historical fact. For many centuries Europeans had a well-established convention for categorizing the peoples of the world into four parts, rather unequal in size and uneven in specificity, namely, Christians, Jews, Mohammedans (as Muslims were commonly called then), and the rest. The last part, the rest, comprised those variously known as heathens, pagans, idolaters, or sometimes polytheists." (xi)

The primary concern for Tomoko Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religion* is to analyze the evolution of the category of “world religions.” As referenced in the quotation above, the typical categorization of religions around the 18th century typically held four options: Christianity, Judaism, Islam (or Mohammedanism), and a vague “other” category. This category ultimately served to support Christianity as the one “world religion” -- a term which denotes the universality of a religion to spread and flourish in all nations. A clear distinction between a “world religion” and a “national religion” was made. While a world religion (Christianity) had a certain universal application, a national religion (Judaism, Islam, and the rest) simply grew within a national culture, unable to survive outside its original environment, and thus was seen as inferior. Judaism was seen as a carrier for the Christian religion, but when Christianity took root lost its divinely intended purpose and natural function. Islam was more problematic to explain due to the fact that it indeed had spread to different nations quite successfully. Such problems were eagerly explained by theologians to account for this phenomenon, such as attributing Islam’s growth to their national ambition as well as their love of war and conquest. Thus a national religion was forced onto other cultures rather than naturally proliferating as Christianity was said to have done.

These categories were challenged in the 19th century upon the discovery of Buddhist texts and the resulting popular fascination with the Sanskrit language. As the study of philology was on the rise, language difference intrigued scholars, who, until the discovery of Sanskrit, held classical Greek to be the purest language in contrast to Hebrew, Arabic, and other Semitic languages. Sanskrit was found to be an older language than Greek or Latin, and showed clear similarity in structure as well as root words. Given that European culture was justified as being a superior culture by its roots in the purer language, the discovery of Sanskrit shook the academic world, as it shed a superior light on an older culture and religion in which Western culture stemmed from: the Aryan culture. European identity came to be accepted as intrinsically Aryan, and thus carried the universality that Christianity had been claiming for the past few hundred years. In other words, the purest lineage from the ancient Aryan culture was through modern Europe, while language groups that were identified as Semitic or Oriental were seen as corruptions fated to diminish in the progression of history.

Such a theory on language origins gave Buddhism significant prestige as an old and universal religion. Buddhism was often likened to Christianity since both traditions were said to break away from their parent national religions. In other words, both were examples of how a world religion emerged from the inferior national religion, thus giving both a legitimate placement in history. This legitimacy of a second world religion besides Christianity raised new thought in regard to how scholars ought to compare two different traditions with relative respectability. It is through this new thought that other religious traditions began to be treated as autonomous cultural systems for the first time rather than the traditional view of other religions as degenerative forms of Christianity.

Over time the concept of national religions became less commonplace. Masuzawa uses the example of the Christian scholar Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) to demonstrate how liberal Christianity adapted to the new categorization of world religions. Troeltsch acknowledged that a truly universal Christianity did not exist, but the religion itself still played a prominent role in the social life of a people. He describes religion as existing in its own sphere, thus demonstrating a similar categorization of religion as we might see today. To make this point Masuzawa only cites one Christian theologian to demonstrate the popular trend. While her argument was convincing, further examples would have been welcomed.

It is also worth noting that Masuzawa offers no conclusion to her work. Her point is to reconstruct the evolution of how world religions have been categorized in order to leave the reader questioning how modern scholarship ought to study such a category with a history of theological biases. Masuzawa certainly is compelling in her argument, but offers little to the discussion of how the field of Comparative Religion ought to respond. Is it possible that “world religion” can be successfully utilized as a scholarly category independent of its past political, racial, and theological biases?

Charlie says

Masuzawa offers a genealogy of the practice of teaching "world religions" in universities. She argues that behind the creation and development of the concept of a "world religion" lies the attempt by European scholars to differentiate themselves from others.

Particularly noteworthy is her narration of the contribution made by comparative linguistics. The development of the "Indo-European" and "Hamito-Semitic" language families provided a scientific basis for religious taxonomies and a way for Europeans to affiliate themselves with the exotic East while distancing themselves from their old religious rivals, Jews and Muslims.

By the late eighteenth century, European scholars had some familiarity with most of the world's cultures. Some divided religions into "world religions," which transcended their birth culture, and mere "folk religions," which seemed permanently tied to a particular society. Many nineteenth-century scholars thought of Christianity as the perfectly universal religion, potentially suitable for all people. Other religions were ranked insofar as they approximated it.

Later, this gave way to the concept of "religion itself" as the true universal. This supposedly universal sphere of human experience became the justification for a pluralist rather than confessional science of religion. Masuzawa questions just how universal a discourse is if it grew out of a specific strain of Protestant liberalism.

The central inquiry is fascinating and the content is pretty good. I do think the order of chapters is a bit disorienting and the close reading approach makes for uneven coverage, but these are small flaws. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in how religion is studied in the academy.

A more comprehensive review is available on my website, Religion Is History:
<https://www.religionishistory.com/201...>
