CHAPTER 9

Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of ‘Religion’ in Third Century Iran

Jason BeDuhn

The general trend of the modern academic study of religions has been to employ the concept of ‘religion’ to cover a universal type of activity or set of activities, a form of which can be found in any human society and culture. This broad application of the term has its uses. Yet its etic character, imposed at times on cultures that do not themselves recognize a distinct ‘religion’ category, has been increasingly noted, often in connection with the idea that religion is a peculiarly modern, even modernist, idea. It is purely tautological, however, to say that the way we moderns use the term religion is a modern invention, informed by distinctive, historically conditioned shifts in discourse and social organization. That fact does not preclude the possibility of a pre-modern concept that anticipated the modern one by identifying the same socio-cultural entities we would place at the center of the modern category of religion. In what follows, I argue that Mani and his early successors in third-century Iran produced such a concept, within which they included such recognizable entities as Christianity, Mazdayasnianism, Buddhism and Jainism, as well as their own Manichaean community, in an unusually rich environment of cultural interchange and comparative awareness presaging the conditions typically associated with the modern era.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith differentiated a broad and generic modern use of the term ‘religion’, referring to a universal human phenomenon (for which he preferred the term ‘faith’), from a narrower, historically specific use referring to discrete systems, and hence ‘religions’ in the plural.¹ There have been times and places where the latter—religions—did not exist; in fact, in human history they appear to have been the exception rather than the rule. “To speak of ‘religions’”, Robert Campany has noted, ‘is to demarcate things in ways that are not inevitable or immutable but, rather, are contingent on the shape of Western history, thought, and institutions. Other cultures may, and do, lack

¹ Smith 1963.
closely equivalent demarcations'.

Nevertheless, the fact that certain historical cultures ‘lacked one-for-one “versions” of the Western category “religions” does not mean that they lacked some usages that are analogous—ones that do something like the same work, ones invoked in the sorts of contexts in which “religions” would be invoked in modern Western discourses’. The Manichaeans employed terms and expressions analogous to modern discussions of religions in that they refer to self-identifying communities that were not interchangeable or coterminous with ethnic or cultural identity, but organized around systems of discourse and practice that were ‘disembedded’ from a particular society and culture; within such communities, the members could understand themselves to share a set of markers and commitments that set them apart from others of the same ethnicity, and united them despite disparate ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

With the historical appearance of such identities, we enter into an environment where a plurality of religions replaces the assumption that ‘religion’ is a sub-category of cultural practices wholly determined by one’s ethnicity. The distillation of some set of such practices into a transportable commodity, capable of crossing from one culture to another, occurs only under very special and rare conditions; and the ability to conceptualize and talk about such entities marks a distinct event in intellectual history. The mere geographic juxtaposition of ethnic and cultural groups with their respective traditional religious practices does not constitute the emergence of a plurality of religions, because each set of religious practices remains exclusively associated with a specific ethnic identity. Individuals could cross these ethnic boundaries and adopt the lifestyle—including the religious practices—of a people to which they had not been born. In the Hellenistic kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean, for example, natives could adopt colonial culture, and colonials could go native. One could ‘Hellenize’ or ‘Judaize’, for instance. Moreover, the intensified mobility of representatives of different cultures meant that one could associate with members of another culture in their religious practices without moving to their native land. Religions emerged in antiquity when particular sets of religious practices no longer carried exclusive identification with such a native land, but belonged to a community that carried its own disembedded cultic identity.

---

3 Campany 2003: 290.
4 I owe this expression to Schwartz 2001: 179; see also North 1992, who differentiates ‘embedded’ religious practices from ‘differentiated religions’.
5 See Herodotus’s definition of Hellene (Histories 8, 144.2): Common blood, common language, common mode of worshiping the gods, common way of life; cf. Origen, Against Celsus 5, 25, 34.