Kinship and Location: In Defence of a Narrow Definition of Indigenous Religions

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The category ‘Indigenous Religions’ has become widely accepted within university departments of religious studies as the preferred nomenclature to designate what Graham Harvey (2013a: 19) calls ‘the majority of the world’s religions,’ perhaps not in terms of the number of adherents, but as a persistent force, either directly or indirectly, in the majority of societies around the world. Harvey (2013a: 19) explains that indigenous religions ‘present an elaborate and wonderful array of different ways of being human, doing ritual, inculcating ideas, dwelling in the world, imagining the cosmos and so on.’ If one pushes Harvey’s claims very far, it soon becomes apparent that what he means by indigenous religions needs careful consideration if the term is to be useful and not subject to multiple misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is for this reason that scholars need to be quite precise about how they employ both parts of the classification, ‘indigenous’ and ‘religions.’ In this article, I re-state my own precise definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘indigenous’ as I have presented them in previous publications (Cox 2007: 53–93; Cox 2009: 99–116; Cox 2010: 1–23; Cox 2015: 5–23). I then summarise some of the chief criticisms that have been levelled against my definition of the terms considered together as ‘indigenous religions,’ and conclude by offering a robust defence of my interpretation of the category.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger and a Restricted Definition of Religion

In several publications over the past ten years, I have developed a theory of religion based in part on the work of the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger. I devoted a section in my book From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions (2007: 75–93) to applying Hervieu-Léger’s theory towards developing a restricted definition of religion. Initially, I analysed an article Hervieu-Léger (1999: 73–92) wrote under the title ‘Religion as Memory’ that appeared in a book edited by Jan Platvoet and Arie Molendijk called The Pragmatics of Defining Religion (1999) and then I drew out themes from her book first published in English in 2000 under the title Religion as a Chain of Memory. Most recently, I proposed a
reductive definition of religion, a position in which, following the work of Walter Capps (1995: 1), I identified the *sine qua non* of religion (that without which religion is not religion) as the transmission of an authoritative tradition that is passed on from generation to generation and thereby enshrinied in the collective memory of identifiable communities (Cox 2013: 308–323).

I want to review my use of Hervieu-Léger in this section and explicitly apply her analysis to what I argue is the necessary and essential component within a definition of religion. In her article appearing the Platvoet-Molendijk volume, Hervieu-Léger (1999: 77) introduces her section on defining religion by quoting from Durkheim’s opening statement in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*:

> It is necessary to begin by defining what is meant by a religion: for without this, we would run the risk of giving the name to a system of ideas and practices which has nothing at all religious about it, or else of leaving to one side many religious facts, without perceiving their true nature.

_Durkheim 1915: 23_

Hervieu-Léger (1999: 77) is aware that many social scientists have avoided all definitions of religion, preferring, as she says, ‘to leave the “theorizing” to the philosophers.’ Sociologists of religion, in particular, simply studied as religion precisely those activities ‘which the society itself designated as “religious”’ (1999: 78). This position, she argues, can no longer be maintained in light of ‘the modern proliferation of belief’ (as witnessed by the upsurge of religious activity internationally) and ‘the de-regulation of the domain of institutionalized religion’ (as evidenced by the emphasis on individual choice in the search for private religious or spiritual meaning) (1999: 78). This does not entail a return to a search for a phenomenological ‘essence’ of religion, but it is necessary to be equipped with a definition of religion ‘which simply allows for the classification of observable phenomena’ (1999: 78).

It is important to understand in this context that Hervieu-Léger’s discussion of the definition of religion was developed in the context of sociological theories of secularisation, particularly in light of the argument that was maintained well into the 1960s that religion had entered into the last phases of an inevitable decline as society had come increasingly under the sway of scientific rationalism. Jeffrey Hadden (1987: 588) calls this a forecast ‘anchored in a broad sweeping theory of secularization, which, in turn, is nested in an even broader theory of modernization.’ He adds: ‘Secularization ... is ... properly described as