CHAPTER 10

Indigenous or Non-Indigenous: Who Benefits from Narrow Definitions of Religion?

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To those who remain resolute that we must always be focusing on a tight, narrow definition of religion, this chapter will be a disappointment. I argue here that there is nothing to tighten. I do not share the anxieties of those such as Hervieu-Léger who are concerned that we might come to a point where ‘religion’ is ‘...nowhere, or else it is everywhere, which in the end comes to the same thing’ (2000: 38). Nor do I think, like Yves Lambert (1991), that we must work to avert the disintegration of the concept of ‘religion.’ Nor do I think that Timothy Fitzgerald’s work (2009) is fatal for our discipline (rather I see it one of the exiting ways forward). Nor do I believe, along with Smith (1982) that ‘religion’ is our term and is only a thing for the scholar’s study. Many of the anxious concerns in our discipline about its future are indeed mythic concerns including our search for the quintessence of religion. Instead of seeking the *sine qua non* of religion, here I start with the question – what would be left if we closed down our discipline? And if it were closed down, what are the social principles that would start it up again? This exercise returns us to the concept of ‘sovereignty.’ As I will explain here, not only are religious groups those groups that claim an ultimate status for their followers, but also, in most cases religions, seek to direct and condition collectively a people’s worldview. In this way religious groups make claims not only to ultimacy, but to sovereignty – deciding what is it that should be the case, and how ‘reality’ should be both structured and approached in making social facts fit the ideals of their sovereign aims. If we consider this, then non-academic sources on ‘religion’ (sources we have long ignored) become most revealing. I suggest here that there are things about ourselves as Western-based scholars that we find convenient to ignore. This is because in part we study religion asymmetrically – we are fascinated with the myths and beliefs of others, we cannot see the myths, beliefs, and religious traditions in which we ourselves are immured. And we cannot see these on account of the biases that go along with being ‘modern.’ When we come to address the term ‘indigenous religion’ we should consider that the problem of defining this term is a problem caused mostly by our perceptions of the world as moderns and from our mythic biases. These impact powerfully on how we define such loaded terms.
If we want a *sine que non* of ‘religion,’ it has been in our faces for as long as we have been modern. As I will remind readers here, ‘religion’ is, at the very least, a vital legal term for the maintenance of the *constitutional* attitudes and operation of the secular state. This is something we rarely notice or discuss as scholars. There it is – the most contested word at the heart of our discipline is actually locked and immovable in some of the most central and politically and legally actionable scriptures of modernity – the modern secular constitution. The word remains open to legal and social interpretation, but it isn’t going anywhere. All the fears, all the scholarly concerns and anxieties that ‘everything’ might be taken as religious if we do not keep our definitions tight, fall away in an instant when we read our national constitutions. The only way that ‘religion’ as a specific term can be removed from our lives (in Australia) is by means of a national referendum or (in the United States) nothing short of another revolution and the establishment of a completely new regime and a new constitution. Given the rate at which Australians vote ‘yes’ to referenda, the later option seems far more likely than the former and both options seem quite impossible. The consequence: ‘religion’ will be with us as a hotly contested term for quite some time, and the legal field will always provide us with an operational understanding of the term no matter what the academy concludes.

Of course the legal arena provides an essential and foundational definition of this word, but the concept of ‘religion’ does not stop here. Beyond constitutional concerns when this word is qualified by an adjective such as ‘indigenous’ the issues at hand become complex but not impossible to sort through and there are pragmatic dimensions to consider particularly in the ideologies behind such a term’s pedagogical use. I note, as Harvey has also noted, that a topic such as ‘indigenous religions’ – however sticky that term might be – is another way the academy can entice students into the study of groups that have, more often than not, been sidelined and sometimes treated as a primitive remnant (Harvey: 2016). The same concept is noted by Tafford (2016). Moreover, *Indienga* and religion are ways of self-description amongst groups such as the indigenous of Costa Rica, and Tsonis (2016) sees ‘indigenous religion’ as a point to negotiate in the wider re-conceptualisation of our discipline beyond the present dominance of the ‘World Religions’ paradigm. All of this is to say that ‘religion’ exists beyond the scope of definitional arguments and scholarly debate. The way we understand the concept is not something for *us* alone, but the use of this word continues to have real world manifestations and consequences. Many of these consequences are deeply political, and this has always left me wondering about Smith’s great claim on the term. In 1982 he wrote,