Political and social issues

This theme explores some social and political aspects of our relationship with nature and environmentalism, especially with respect to gender, race, and indigeneity. It allows us to probe how relations of power can mirror and mutually reinforce how we construct our relationship with the natural world.

With respect to gender, one useful case study is the relationship of British ecofeminism with political protest movements of the late twentieth century and with the Goddess movement, and subsequent debates around essentialism (Gaard 2011). Another is the Chipko movement of 1970s India, which facilitates discussion of a grassroots conservation movement with collective women's leadership and built on sacrality of the local forest (Vandana 2016). Discussion of environmentalism in the United States allows us to explore not only how environmentalist narratives based around white experience can alienate and exclude other ethnicities (Carter 2020), but also how academia itself can overlook and deprivilege cultural environmentalism in non-white cultures (Baugh 2020). However, discussion of eco-Womanism enables exploration of the development of a radically inclusive spiritual ecological praxis from the lived experience of black women in the United States (Maparyan 2016), also linking to ideas of intersectionality.

The Sit-Spot Exercise
sacredearthland.co.uk/what-is-a-sit-spot-and-how-do-you-do-it/

This exercise was originally developed by Jon Young to help people develop and experience an empathetic relationship with specific elements of nature. It involves choosing an easily accessible personal space in which to sit for a short time every day to spend time with nature, cultivating a sense of mindful empathy with the elements of that space. Students can continue the practice for as long as feels useful to them and critically reflect on the experience. This provides useful subjective context for discussions around eco-spirituality.

Another important area is indigeneity, how we think about our relationship with the land, and various religion-related claims to land rights. Discussion might focus on how colonial narratives based on Christian ideas of dominion have facilitated the alienation of communities from their rights to their land (Berne Burow et al 2018), and how decolonization seeks the problematization and dismantling of such narratives. Comparative case studies can include the protests around the Alta Dam and the Dakota Pipeline (Kraft 2020).

Conclusion

Linking together these three themes using case studies such as the ones mentioned above provides an especially potent opportunity for exploring how religion and religious narratives mediate between individual spiritual experience, religious communities, and a wide range of social and political issues. This kind of specifically religious studies led approach helps students to critically reflect on their own experience, and also develop an empathetic yet critical personal response to climate justice, the natural world, and wider societal concerns.

The World Religions paradigm revisited

Moojan Momen

I think the readers of this Bulletin are very familiar with the way that the word "religion" and "world religions" have been problematized by scholars of religious studies. The word "religion" originally meant something close to the present day meaning of piety or righteousness. The later use of it by (mainly) European Christians to mean a system of beliefs and practices held by a group of people arose during the 19th century as an accommodation to a growing awareness, especially among colonial powers, that other peoples had sophisticated systems of practices and beliefs. Thus this concept of religion emerged within a particular Eurocentric historical and cultural concept. It was largely the result of the worldview of those scholars who wrote on this subject in the 19th century. By prioritising scripture and theology (rather than, say, holy law or mystical experience) as being the core of "religion", these scholars were able to build up a worldview in which there was hierarchy of religions with Christianity at the top as the most advanced and highly evolved religion; montheistic religions with a scripture were next down the hierarchy (Judaism and Islam); next were religions with a scripture, beliefs and a civilization (Hinduism and Buddhism). These were the "Big Five". Other religions such as the archaic religions of Greece, Rome and the Fertile Crescent were valued because of the light they shed on Christianity. On the lowest rung of the ladder were the "primitive" (including pre-Christian European) religions of the native peoples of the world. The concept "religion" became, in the 19th century, a tool of colonialism, creating a normative worldview that cast Europe and Christianity as the apex of civilization and thus justifying the colonialist enterprise of "civilizing" the rest of the world. This was a way of exercising power and a justification for the use of force. In the 20th century, an effort was made to reduce the triumphalism of the concept of religions as conceived in the 19th century. Out of this the "World Religions" paradigm was conceived by Ninian Smart and others in an attempt to be pluralistic. But this paradigm also had hidden colonialist aspects – the topics under which each religion was descibed were drawn from Chritianity.

A paradigmatic example of this concept of "a religion" occurred in India. When the British came to India, they were faced with an extraordinarily diverse and seemingly chaotic array of practices, some of which could be identified from within the British mindset as religious, but others where is was difficult (and usually unhelpful) to distinguish "religious" traditions from social, family or tribal ritual and traditions. Most of these practices were local and had little in the way of elaborated belief systems associated with them, but some were supra-local and these usually had a more elaborate belief system. The resolution of this was to create an artificial religion-secular divide and then to call the religion part of this divide "Hindu", a term that was originally (as Hind or al-Hind) a geographical one assigned to the lands beyond the Sindh river by Iranians and later by Muslim conquerers, and only gradually came to be used to designate their religious beliefs. Even then, it originally referred non-specifically to those residents of India (or more specifically northern India) who were not Muslims, and it did not describe any specific religious practices or beliefs.

The creation of a religion called "Hinduism" stems mostly from the efforts of Western scholars to fit the culture of India into a pre-conceived Western pattern of "religions". To a large extent, they had a pre-conception of religions as having scripture, a priestly class, a theology of salvation and concepts of an after-life, and so they picked out a textualized, Brahmanical Hinduism and made this into the "religion" of India, whereas in fact it did not fit with the practices of the majority of the inhabit-

ants of the sub-continent. Indeed as Timothy Fitzgerald commented, the putative religion "Hinduism" is perhaps located "more in secular universities in Euro America than in Indian villages." At best it was "a Europeanised version of the dominant Brahmanical ideology" and of little relevance to the villagers who made up the vast majority of India's population. A parallel process occured with the other cultures of the world, including Japanese, Chinese, African and native American.

Following on from this, scholars of religion, such as Tomoko Masuzawa, Suzanne Owen and James Cox have considered the concept of "religion" and its derivative "world religion" as an essentialising and problematic construct; a reification that constrains a rich and diverse human experience into a narrow Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic framework. They have suggested alternative frameworks for studying and teaching this phenomenon.

I want to make it clear that I have no problem with this line of thinking and my intention is not to contradict any of their findings or to push back against this trend. I do however have a problem with one result of this line of research. Whether scholars like it or not, large numbers of people across the world now see their identity in terms of the World Religion paradigm. In India, for example, the majority of the educated population consider themselves as belonging to a religion called Hinduism. The process of the "Brahmanization" or "Sanskritization" of the vast variety of local deities and religious practices is well under way. And of course the politicization of Hinduism in the form of aggressively Hindu political parties is having a major impact on the country. A parallel process is going on in the Islamic world culminating in the rise of political Islam, with Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and many other examples. In the United Kingdom, the existence of such organizations as the Hindu Council UK, Muslim Council of Britain, and Network of Buddhist Organisations is evidence that the World Religions Paradigm is deeply entrenched in the consciousness of these communities. It is a source of identity for large numbers of people.

Thus the concept of "religions" and "world religions" began as an academic exercise by white (mainly male) scholars in 19th century Europe, but an exercise with a colonialist and hegemonic background and consequences. It has now however been thoroughly taken on board by many millions of people who self-identity as one of these "world religions". The theorizing of 19th Century Western scholars has become a lived reality throughout the world. Would telling the rest of the world that they have identified with an imposed illusory construct (in effect, that what they think is their reality is false) not be replacing 19th Century colonialism with a neo-colonialist turn be a hegemonic exercise in telling people who they are and what they should be thinking?

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