Title: The Arrogation of Being by the Blind-Spot of Religion

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Citation: Hitotsubashi journal of social studies, 33(1): 83-102

Issue Date: 2001-07

Type: Departmental Bulletin Paper

Text Version: publisher

URL: http://doi.org/10.15057/8302
PART 2: WAR, HISTORY AND CULTURE
THE ARROGATION OF BEING BY THE BLIND-SPOT OF RELIGION

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The last millennium may be rightfully called the Christian millennium; the last five centuries have been increasingly Christian centuries; and this moment of the twenty first century—a veritable global moment is a Christian moment. Substitute “religion” for “Christian” in the above claim and it would be equally defensible. Indeed, my argument in this paper is that “religion,” as we understand it today—that is, where belief is an integral and indispensable part of it—is Christian in origin and by and large remains, even in its reincarnation as secularism, a Christian affair. I shall spend the greater part of this paper unpacking this claim. In closing, I shall hazard the hypothesis that belief—“religious” belief in particular—creates conditions for more sustained collective violence than do traditional practices.

The Prototypic Religion: Christianity

On the face of it, the claim that religion is inseparable from belief may be objected to on the grounds of narrowness, of being parochial. After all, several students of religion, most prominently, Emile Durkheim (1915), have criticized attempts to make religion into an intellectual category. For instance, he gave Edward Tylor, known as the father of anthropology, a dressing down for trying to define religion as a species of “explanation.” For Durkheim, the essence of religion, its elementary forms were to be found located, not in the intellect that demands explanations but in the heart of ritual. Nevertheless, it would appear by Durkheim’s own methodology that only the social scientist (in Durkheim’s day, they were all of European extraction) could give an account of this religion, describe it, define it and theorize it. In other words, transform it into belief—an objectivized one for the social scientist and a subjective one for the practitioner—which can be explained and defended. In short, ritual too becomes a religion in so far as it ends up becoming a belief, even if only latently.

After almost twenty years of resisting the idea, I have come to the conclusion that religion is not a human universal. It never was. In this rapidly globalizing world it might some day become one. But it isn’t one yet. Attempts to weave so expansive a defining net called religion that would also earn the label “universal” because of its ability to draw in a dispersal of disparate practices into its snare, have all failed. To be sure, I am certainly not the first one to come to the conclusion that religion is not a universal. In 1962, Cantwell Smith supported this conclusion with persuasive arguments, though not to everybody’s satisfaction. More recently, in his fastidiously argued book, the Indian philosopher, S.N. Balagangadhara (1994), defends the same position, but takes it beyond Smith’s plea; which was a plea to re-admit a

1 An early version of this essay was read at the Macalester International Round Table in the Spring of 2000.
faith-centered religion for a belief-centered one that would, if nothing else, be tolerant of difference and thereby make religion less parochial. In my own discipline of anthropology, Talal Asad (1993), in his critique of Clifford Geertz's much celebrated universal definition of religion (1973)—to which we shall return—historicizes the unexamined elements of that definition and thereby seriously undermines its claim to universality. Common to all three authors is the problematic and yet inevitable presence of belief in religion. In writing this chapter, I wish to draw something from all three scholars and, hopefully, say something new as well.

Cantwell Smith's focus was on issues of definition. I agree with Balagangadhara; that there is more at stake than definition. Balagangadhara generalizes, without reservations, that which is true of Christianity to be equally true of Judaism and Islam, the other two “Semitic religions,” as he calls them. I have misgivings about such a generalization, with respect to Judaism in particular. Even though Talal Asad holds with Smith and Balagangadhara that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, he does not do so “only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993:29). Well said. For Asad, however, the discursive processes he speaks of rests upon a more fundamental question and the corollary assumption embedded in it: how does power produce religion? While I would grant that power is necessary for any concept or idea—“religion” for example—to expand, grow and hold sway, the germ of such an idea or concept can either lodge itself in the heart of power or position itself against power and find its sustenance in resisting power. We must also allow for the possibility that the very formation of a given germinal concept may not invariably and in all historical contexts be yoked to power, but be indifferent to it instead. Or rather, the power it contains could be its own, the power of an idea, for good or for ill, coiled in potentia, ready to strike when the conditions are right. There are instances when an idea, concept, dogma or doctrine may be activated by relatively insignificant, marginal (even powerless) discourses. This germ however—to return to the agricultural metaphor—may lie dormant until the conditions that are conducive to its germination and growth, its actualization and generalization, arrive in the course of history.

An important correction introduced by Michael Waltzer in his reading of Max Weber's famous thesis on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, speaks to this very point. This worldly asceticism as practiced by the early Calvinists, Puritans and other sectarians did not directly lead to entrepreneurial capitalism. In fact, these early Puritans were anything but capitalists. Nonetheless, the bodily and mental disciplines enjoined by their salvation-panicked religion of anxious orderliness, served as antidotes to the uncertainty of those disorderly times. These disciplines included punctuality, trustworthiness, frugality, asceticism, introspection, Godly watchfulness, loathing of idleness and anti-authoritarianism. With the commitment to contractual bonds displacing bonds of feudal fealty, the literacy required to read the Bible and take notes during the Sunday sermon enabled all believers to read and understand contracts and to keep an account of these. In fact, it makes the act of keeping accounts—not only of contracts, earnings and expenditure, but more importantly, of one's daily life—an activity of salvific importance. These cultivated traits and practices, taken together, in the historically liminal context sandwiched between an older feudal order of stasis and predictability and the newer one of risk and uncertainty, served as a stay against the possibility of a fluid situation turning into an overwhelming deluge. The powers against which, some of them consciously
rallied were the church, the king, and the state. But what all of them rallied against was “the powers of evil” manifested in the social chaos that surrounded them, in the lives of vagabonds and drifters, in the purposelessness of these “obviously” damned. It took several generations after the salvation-panic was over and the zeal of the revolution of these early Puritans spent, before the “disciplines” acquired during those anxious times could be summoned to serve a totally new enterprise: modern, industrial capitalism. In short, the “idea” came first, and its partnership with entrepreneurial capitalism and political power came much later. Likewise, we shall see, the seed of a belief-centered religion was sown in the earliest years of Christianity but did not take root nor flourish until much later.

Asad elegantly recalls for us the gathering and securing of power by medieval Christianity and the church. He does not, however, indicate whether or not Christianity was a religion qua religion at that time. Rather, he notes that only in the seventeenth century were attempts made to formulate a universal definition of religion. A Lord Herbert came up with the first substantive definition of religion, and it was cast in terms of belief. As Asad puts it, “this emphasis on belief meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers give assent” (1993:40-41). By Lord Herbert’s definition, even Christianity is more than likely to have been the religion of the reflective few, who, unless they belonged to certain Protestant denominations, were mostly clerics of the church.

As already stated, I hold that religion itself is by and large a Christian affair—and only arguably an Islamic and Jewish affair—that has been, over the centuries, attributed by Christians to all the peoples of the world. Such an attribution has been, at best, an act of courtesy, even generosity, and at worst, one of unreflective arrogance. Sadly, given the way global power relations have worked over the past thousand years, the “conquered” in their turn clamored to prove that they too, even as their conquerors did, had “religion.” With formidable help from orientalists, Indologists, scholars of comparative religion and anthropologists, the west and the westernized have come to hold that, despite evidence to the contrary, all the peoples of the world have religion.

Even though a full-fledged definition—and one that includes belief as one of its necessary components—had not been proffered until early European modernity, I agree with Balagangadhara that the seed of this definition was sown much earlier, before early modernity, before even the early Middle Ages. Balagangadhara dates it back to the early Christians of Rome. According to the picture that Balagangadhara paints, roughly the years between 100 B.C.E and 200 A.C.E. Rome was a place filled with a multiplicity of cults, philosophical schools, and associations. The cults in particular, had certain public practices, which we would today call rituals. It was the civic duty of citizens to participate in these ritual “practices and ceremonies celebrating the deities of the cities” (1994:36).

This makes one see certain similarities between the Rome of the Golden and Silver Ages and many present-day villages and towns of India. Alas, the number of such towns and villages have been dwindling since the rise of religious Hinduism. In the South Indian villages with which I became familiar in the early seventies, Christians and Muslims were free to participate procession in which a “Hindu” deity was carried through the streets, “Hindus” and Muslims to participate in Christian ceremonies, and Hindus and Muslims to participate in public Islamic celebrations.

As for Rome, Balagangadhara pointedly asks: “How shall we understand this phenome-
non, almost prototypical for the Graeco-Roman world, of participating in religious activities
and sacrifices (oftentimes even leading them) and yet not believing in the deities to whom such sacrifices were offered?" (1994:38). (The identical question could have been, and possibly still could, be asked of most South Asians). Philosophers and prominent citizens such as Cicero, Epicurus and Plutarch participated in, and even led, collective practices of worship and celebration of gods in whom they did not believe. It was the same Epicurus who was an Eleusinian and the writer of polemical tracts against deities. It was the same Cicero who denounced the Augurs and remained a "member of the board of Augurs." Critical tracts and dissertations on religio and gods coexisted with religious practices that were contrary to the theories expounded in the former. Following a lengthy quote from Cicero's De Natura Deorum in which Cicero defends the practices that were contrary to theory by invoking the power and inviolability of traditio, Balagangadhara comments, "some things are retained because they have been transmitted over generations, and they require no other legitimation" (1994:42).

The only two prominent groups that refused to celebrate the Roman deities were the Jews—who were, by their traditio-embedded religio, forbidden to make, serve or bow down before any images (Genesis 20.4)—and the Christians. That the traditio of the Jews was ancient was beyond dispute and therefore, however reluctantly, was acceded to. The Christians' claim, that they too were forbidden by their religio to partake in the celebratory practices of the non-Christians' traditiones-embedded religiones, seemed bizarre to the Pagan Romans. For Christians were made up of individuals who had, after all, openly forsaken their own traditions and gods. Eusebius's summary of Porphyry as translated by Wilken renders the charge thus:

(How) can men ... who have apostatized from those ancestral gods by whom every nation and every state is sustained? Or what good can they reasonably hope for, who have set themselves at enmity and at war against the preservers, and have thrust away their benefactors? For what else are they doing than fighting against their gods? (Quoted in Balagangadhara 1994:49)

Essentially, the charge was that Christians were either a people with a traditionless religio at best, and at worst with no religio at all. The Christians were a people—unlike the Romans, the Greeks, the Jews or the Egyptians—who had abandoned their histories and traditionae. While Traditio can mean "tradition," it also means "surrender." The Christians could not trace themselves through a set of practices back to a particular people; they were incapable of surrendering themselves to their own distant pasts, pasts that they had either forsaken or never had.

How did the Christians meet this challenge? The Jews had based their refusals not only on the laws of Moses, but also on the customary and hallowed practices of their ancestors. According to Balagangadhara, the Christians, who had no claim to custom, appropriated the Jewish reasons by transforming the very question. Christianity was ancient not because of its practices that could be traced back to antiquity, to a place and to a people; Christianity was ancient because its doctrines were ancient (1994:51). In the beginning was the word, not the deed. By returning to the Word, Christianity was but the fulfillment of Judaism. "It was religio precisely because it was not traditio" (1994:55). Once this transformation of question and answer had been securely established, the criticism of Pagan practices were only a means to get to Pagan beliefs and prove them false. In antiquity (and in India until recently) the relationship between practice and belief was, for the most part, characterized by mutual
indifference. And when reason was invoked as a critic, it was not to undermine tradition but
to stem the excesses of superstition (Ibid: 56).

Does not this, however, beg the question as to why, of all the available attempted
definitions of religion, I choose only that in which “belief” is necessarily included? The answer
must begin with the observation that none of the available definitions to date are capable of
covering the multifarious phenomena—manifested in practice or in belief or both—found all
over the globe, which for one reason or another bears the label, “religion.” The waste-heap of
history is filled with the remains of a multitude of past definitions of ‘religion.’ Regardless,
those who use the term, with whatever meanings they attribute to it, do so as if it were a
universal. It is not my aim to examine each one of these definitions so as to reveal their cultural
and historical specifics and rehearse their failure to capture a universal by a long shot. All
extant definitions of religion, directly or indirectly, overtly or tacitly, strive towards incorpo-
rating “beliefs,” be they in the form of creeds, doctrine or mere explanation. They attempt to
put forth a set of propositions as to what religion is or ought to be and submit them to the
faithful to “believe.”

There are recorded instances of “students” from the west who have, in their encounter
with other cultures and practices, discovered that the struggle to settle on a universal definition
of religion to be a formidable one. What is most illuminating in their reports may be found in
those moments of candor that flash somewhere early on in their inquiries, when they declare,
with different degrees of despair, but with undeniable clarity of insight, that the culture or
people they are studying does not have religion. Unfortunately, hardly any of them stop there
but instead lose that clarity as they try to expand their definition of religion so as to capture
more and more of the uncapturable in a cloud of definitional smoke. In so doing, the “other”
is transformed into “another” of the same. And, it is assumed, since the same has religion, so
must the other. But this “another” ends up being only a highly qualified and equivocated
version of the prototype, a mere reflection of the “original” on troubled waters. And this
original is to be found in Christianity, a prototype to which Islam and Judaism may measure
up, but certainly none of the so-called religions of Asians, Africans or the Amerindians could.
The defining features of this prototype consists of (1) belief in a God, (2) a creed, (3) a
“church” in the sense that a group partakes in collective worship in a given place, and (4) Holy
Scriptures. Anyone attempting to include defining features other than these four will find these
additions to be either superfluous, mere supplements, kindly accommodations or prejudicial
appropriations; in short, they will be found to be neither necessary nor sufficient. But if any
“religion” lacks one or more of these four core features, it will be found wanting and require
special pleading. The core features are both necessary and sufficient; the rest, neither.
Christianity, Judaism and Islam have them; Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and most, if not all,
African, Australian, Oceanian and Amerindian “religions” do not.

Balagangadhara further argues that what is common to all three Semitic religions is the
centrality they accord to “belief” in their self-definition. I am not as familiar with Islam or
Judaism, but I am familiar enough with Christianity to know that a non-believing Christian
would be a strange creature, unless qualified by “nominal.” The converse is best illustrated by
an example. Just before my father was to marry my mother, and willing to become a Christian
for the love of her, he had an appointment with the missionary who was to facilitate the
conversion. The first question the missionary asked him was: ‘do you believe in Siva?’ As long
as my father lived, he recalled this as being one of the strangest questions anyone ever asked
him. He acknowledged Siva. He knew stories about him. But believe? That was a strange concept indeed to apply to Siva! He lived among the manifestations of Siva. He lived the rest of his life as a Christian; possibly coming to ‘believe’ in Jesus; but Siva or Vishnu or Rama was not someone to believe in. That is not how an Indian relates to these powerful beings. One takes their being for granted, an ontological given, requiring no epistemological apperception.

*Go Ye into All the World and Universalize*

If one were to move from our focus on Christianity’s formation in the Roman context to the very words of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, one sees the germinal seed which harbors the triumph of belief over practice, about-ness over is-ness, epistemology over ontology, seeing over being. The injunction to “believe” begins to proliferate in the gospels and in the New Testament as a whole. If, to justify themselves to the Romans they reached across time to locate their *religio* in antiquity that was more ancient than anyone else’s, in Christ’s command to his disciples we see the reaching across space. He said to his disciples: “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel unto every creature”(Mark 16:15). The charge to universalize Christianity as well as the observation of its universal potential can be found in this very verse. No Jew or “Hindu” would have thought of converting an outsider into an insider. That would have amounted to violating *traditio*. Though now, thanks to Christianity, both do. In the very next verse in Mark’s gospel Christ emphasizes the importance of belief: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. Christ also assured those who chose to believe in him that they would not remain in darkness, no longer be blind”(John 12:44). He claimed that He was the Light of the way, the Truth and the Life and that no man could come unto God the Father except through Him (John 14:06). Here then took seed a *religio* that transcended the place and time of *traditio* and adopted believing and the optic metaphor of seeing as its precept and promise.

To appreciate the contrast, I wish to ponder further the question of religion and belief by considering their place in two traditions: in what has come to be called Hinduism and Buddhism. Let me do so via a detour through anthropologyland in the specific cases of Hinduism and the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

*Two Ethnographic Encounters with “Hinduism”*

Staking my claim as an ethnographer, allow me to plead for your indulgence as I introduce you to two ethnographic events. Both, to distinctly different degrees, partook of three ontological modes. These three modes I shall term mood, moment and mind, a triad on which I have elaborated elsewhere (1996: Ch.4) and will but summarily touch upon here in order to facilitate a better understanding of the role and place of belief in Christianity, a religion, if ever there was one.

The two events I have in mind are weddings. If pressed, I may even concede that they were “Hindu” weddings, making sure to remind you that I place “Hindu” between scare-quotes. The first took place in 1974 in a village in South India. It belonged to a type of wedding that I was to witness and study more than fifty times over the following two years, in villages,
cities and towns all over South India. This (type of) wedding was traditional and local. The second occurred in a chateau nouveau in New Jersey in 1999. It was religionish and global. (I know; “religionish” is a fishy word, hardly English. My point, exactly.) There were many things common to both weddings. In both, rituals were performed before a fire (the homa kundam) in which the officiating Brahmin, the bride and groom, and several relatives participated. During both rituals the Brahmin recited appropriate mantras from Sanskrit texts. Common of course to both weddings was the presence of the same anthropologist—same, except in the second, twenty-five years older, and arguably a little wiser, but certainly far less earnest.

The differences between the two weddings were as many as were the similarities, some germane to the theme of this essay, some not. Not germane is the fact that one was a Tamil wedding and the other a Punjabi wedding. It is germane, however, that during the Punjabi wedding in 1999 the priest and several members of the audience reminded us that this was a wedding in the “Hindu religious tradition.” In 1974, by contrast, no one thought to mention this fact, either because it was obvious or else because it was not a wedding in the Hindu religious tradition after all. In fact, the fifty odd weddings I had attended between 1974 and 1976 in South India were identified by Tamils as Brahmin, Vellalah, Gaunda, Parayar or by numerous other jati (or “caste”) names, and also as either Christian or Muslim weddings—as if these too belonged to the same class of jatis. But never was a wedding I attended identified as Hindu. Christian weddings alone, however, were marked by the fact that they took place in a “house of worship” called a church. The Christians saw the church as a sacred place and distinguished it from the place where the wedding feast would be held. The latter was not seen as a sacred place. The feast at most Tamil weddings were 100% vegetarian with no alcohol served. The New Jersey wedding offered choices: Veg, non-Veg and yes, Sushi. And that was only for “snacks.” A multi-course dinner banquet followed with dancing and alcohol from the finest wineries, distilleries and breweries from all corners of the globe. But again, this is a difference of little significance, because the food at both weddings, though very different, was terrific. What was significant is that the wedding feast at the New Jersey event was considered not part of the wedding ritual, or as the mother of the bridegroom put it, “It was not part of the sacred ritual, it was for all to enjoy.” Was this non-sacred part, secular, post-figuring a Durkheimian dichotomy? Was the sacred part not to be “enjoyed”—whatever that meant—by all? The division reminded me of the typical Christian wedding I alluded to, which takes place in a church with the feast that follows in a space that is not the church. This stands in stark contrast to the many non-Christian weddings of South India.

It is not germane to my paper that the Sanskrit accent of the Brahmin at the Punjabi wedding was as dysphonic as the Tamil Brahmin’s was euphonic, nor that Punjabis were better partyers by far than Tamils. But it is germane that at the New Jersey wedding, the ritual specialist paused at various points during the rituals and the recitations to provide an exegesis of what he was saying and doing. In New Jersey, the guests sat on chairs arranged in neat rows, almost congregation-like, and paid keen, even if at times, bemused attention to what the officiant was saying. Had the priest in Tamil Nadu launched into an exegetical exercise it would have either gone completely unnoticed or, more than likely, the guests would have taken the priest to be slightly deranged. At the wedding in New Jersey the priest wanted the recitations and the rituals to mean something and the members of the audience expected them to mean something; at the weddings in South India, with a few exceptions, priest and
participants considered the recitations and the rituals significant but meaningless. If you press me to hazard a characterization of these rituals, I would have to call them, in all retrospective honesty, mindless. For in dominant western epistemologies, meaning has been, and remains, a mental phenomenon. At least in my discipline, the structuralists, the post-structuralists, the symbolic anthropologists, and even the materialists would agree on this, even though they may disagree as to which is more important, mind or matter.

During my first year of anthropological fieldwork in 1974, my anthropologist-wife, our two research assistants and I recorded, by all available means, every possible detail of the ritual performed by the officiating Brahmin. Our eyes and ears were focused, our pen and notebook active and alert, our cameras alive and clicking. Our goal was to miss nothing. Except for the technology of photo-taking, we were more akin to worshippers at a prayer meeting of early Puritans than we could have imagined possible for two self-professed atheists or agnostics posing as scientists. There were no explicit sermons, but (and possibly because of that) we regarded ritual as a cryptic sermon, ready to pour forth with meaning if we could only make ourselves fit to receive it, to understand that which was concealed in symbolic representations. We would, later, with the help of ritual specialists, scholars of Hinduism, textualists, and our own training in symbolic anthropology, decode words and deeds and find therein, meaning. Ritual, for us, was in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's words, "meanings imprisoned in action;" setting these meanings free was our task, our calling (1937:81).

What is more, ritual actions, including ritual utterances—Durkheim had taught us—were at the core of religion. The "elementary forms of the religious life" were to be found in ritual. Beliefs may overtly or covertly accompany these rituals but beliefs, expressed in doctrine, dogma or creed, often hid what was at the core, concealed what religion was really about. Durkheim never doubted for a moment that ritual was anything but religion. He did take beliefs (i.e., native beliefs) into consideration, but on the whole favored the view that beliefs got in the way of true understanding. Belief was for Durkheim a matter of art and material for the artist. It was ritual that constituted the object of scientific inquiry. It was not that what the natives believed was unimportant or even dispensable. But beliefs had to be sifted through so as to arrive at the real meaning that reposed in the more foundational beliefs imprisoned in ritual action which were to be brought to light only by the analyst. Rituals had to be studied and analyzed for what they represented. Ritual actions were fundamentally and importantly symbolic. Had Durkheim then broken free of a belief-centered understanding of religion and arrive at a more fundamental, elementary or universal understanding and definition of religion? Hardly. There remained a belief that vied for center stage. This was the belief (or belief system) of the student of the human sciences. But the difference was that the belief of the human scientist would be called theory.

Sigmund Freud paved the way for the pathologization of ritual by setting its recursive structure alongside that of obsessive-compulsive symptomatology. The enlightening diagnosis itself is made possible only by the reality of an enlightened theory—nay, belief—called psychoanalysis.

The road that led from pure belief to pure theory is a long and interesting one, but too long to review in this paper except to note that it is one with the story of Christianity. It begins in antiquity with the separation, by a traditionless Christianity, of religio from traditio; and with the making of other traditions—including those of the Pagans—into merely other "religions," fit for comparison, conversion and conquest. It is fascinating to note the growth of
this process even over the nine hundred odd years that separate St Augustine from St. Thomas of Aquinas. To quote Balagangadharra:

Anyone who contrasts the City of God with the Summa Contra cannot but be struck by the different attitudes exhibited by these two great minds of the Catholic Church with respect to "other religions". In the pages of Augustine, the "religions" of the Greeks and the Romans are constantly present. His polemics are directed against the "survivals" of the Graeco-Roman cults and associations. They are living presences, constantly reminding Christianity of an otherness, irrespective of what St. Augustine called them and how the church looked at them. By contrast, in a work written against the gentiles, Aquinas’ tone is abstract and distant, which has less to do with his rational approach than with the subject matter.

In his history of the Christian doctrine, Pelikan (1971:39) notes the situation as follows:

The Summa against the Gentiles of Thomas Aquinas was written at a time when there were certainly very few "Gentiles," that is, pagans, left in Western Europe and when those for whom it was ostensibly composed could not have understood it.

This observation, while true, masks a very important question: How could Aquinas himself have understood what paganism was like? This (mis)understanding through the distancing of the other has continued in western scholarship to this very day. Even anthropologists who go to "the field" never get there because they take home along with them.

The reformation marks the greatest watershed where Prince Belief was enthroned as King. Max Weber’s opus The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is a testament to this achievement, and so are his other works on comparative religion, religion as ‘belief.’ With the Enlightenment, a new religion in the image of its prototype was born. This religion will be called secularism. But secularism, a theory and an epistemology in its own right, provides a way of seeing the world. Seeing, which ought to be but one way of being in the world becomes the supreme, if not the only, way of being in the world. Theoretical knowledge insinuates itself as that form of knowledge that will make the cosmos explainatorily intelligible. The question, "do you believe in Jesus?" can be transformed into, "do you believe in science?" without encountering an awkward heartbeat.

My mentor, Victor Turner, was an anthropologist trained in the Durkheimian tradition. If from Durkheim he learned the power of conscience collectif he also learned from him the persuasive power of representation collectif. He was also a Catholic turned Marxist turned Marxist-Catholic. Even though Turner was far more receptive to native exegesis of ritual than Durkheim, and did not rush through it as the latter had done, one wonders if he could have ever forgotten the lessons he learned from Marx that consciousness could at times be false (and conversely, also true) and that if representations represent then they are also capable of misrepresenting. After all, these representations were symbols, or signs of convention, and conventions could reveal or conceal. Neither Turner nor his students would have been so boorish as to consider native exegeses misrepresentations or false. After all, we were post-Gadamerian hermeneuticians; but we were also cultural anthropologists, trained to elevate our own theoretical representations to a level that could only be called “more general” or “higher,” or ones that “opened up a wider horizon.” And if lucky, we fused our horizon of understanding with the Other’s. We were oblivious to the fact that in this fusion we lost little or nothing of ours and they would lose much of theirs.
With the increasing distancing of fields such as anthropology from the conceits of the overt claims of the natural sciences, such theories may not have been christened “scientific,” but they were seen as the end product of analytic reasoning. And thus, even though the Gadamerian assertion that “every point of view (that of science included) is only a point of view” was loudly professed, there was no getting rid of the whisper of the Diltheyan envy of and hope for a standard in the human sciences that could some day stand up to the claims of the natural sciences. Science claimed that scientific theory made the world explanatorily intelligible, made us see more clearly. And so did Christianity, which in one of its most moving evangelical hymns, *Amazing Grace*, proclaims a believer’s experience in the words: I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.

The very image evoked by the notion of a higher level of analysis privileges the ocular. Why would one want to rise to a higher level except to be able to have a wider perspective, a better view? Theory itself has its roots in the Greek *thea* = to see, akin to the *thea* in the spectacle of theater. Moreover, one always theorizes “about” something. “Aboutness” is basic to theory; and “aboutness” is also basic to religion, especially Christianity. The scientist and the Christian have this one thing in common, they are committed to a form of knowledge, which has to do with “knowing about.” True representations are what the Christian and the scientist need if they are to get “right” that which they try to know about. The Other’s representations, including beliefs and exegeses if available are certainly invaluable, especially for ardent students of comparative religion or anthropology, enabling him to see through and beyond appearances. For Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, they were invaluable because they promised to help expose the false and the illusory. For Durkheim and Weber, representations revealed something more than that which they appeared to be about; they revealed the nature of society, the power of ideology, or the workings of history. But even in the absence of an expressed indigenous belief or exegesis, ritual action itself was taken as representing something other than itself; it was taken to mean something. How it meant and what it meant is what the scientist is after. Religion is an exercise in aboutness. So is theory in science. And to those who see ritual to constitute the core of religion it must also be an exercise in aboutness, an exercise in providing the believer a way of seeing the world, the cosmos. If properly theorized, rituals too will make the world about which they are, explanatorily intelligible. My argument is that this is a very Christian, and ergo, a religious notion of ritual.

In the New Jersey wedding the priest was a theorist. He was interpreting his actions, recitations and incantations in order to provide himself and his audience a way of *seeing* the world. He was performing a “Hindu” wedding—Hindu, as in Hindu religion. There was some awkwardness. He had not found his stride yet, which was cause for some levity among the members of the audience. And he knew it too and straddled the divide between exegesis and clowning and kept losing his balance. But he was almost there. The HinduISM hadn’t found its stride either. But it too was almost there. It was at the brink of arriving at the global moment, the religious moment, the Christian moment.

If I keep repeating the word “moment” I do so intentionally. Partly I intend it as a nod to the “Global Moment” I referred to in my opening sentence and partly in relation to the contrast which “moment” holds to the two other elements in the triad I have invoked: “mood” and “mind.” The word mood connotes a state of feeling, possibly vague and diffuse, but

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2 This triad is a species of the philosopher Charles S.Pierce’s phenomenological categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. See C.S.Pierce 1932: 1.286-1.340; 5.71-5.920 and E.V.Daniel 1996: Ch.4
relatively enduring. It is a disposition toward the world at any particular time yet with a timeless quality to it. In the South Indian wedding, mood was of utmost importance. And the mood of the wedding was created not by the light of exegeses (or what I would like to call theoretical knowledge) but by a state of being that was determined by an array of practices. Not until the end of my second year in the field did I realize that what was going on in a Tamil wedding was not only what was taking place around the homa kundam and those nearest to it: the Brahmans with their rituals and recitations, the drummers and nadaswaram players with their music, and even the bride and groom. Matters of equal if not greater significance were taking place outside this "ritual" zone. There, folks were getting reacquainted, making alliances, looking for prospective brides and grooms for sons and daughters, gossiping, rehearsing old prejudices and trying out new ones, testing each others skills, poise, status and grace, taking measure of each other's place in an evolving order of things, transgressing maps of old privileges with stories of new ones. But do all these activities have anything to do with the marriage ritual as such? What a Christian question! It was all these activities taken together that created the appropriate mood of the wedding that put the moment of tying the wedding-knot in place and in perspective.

At the New Jersey wedding I did compulsively what all ethnographers do: eavesdrop, observe, note a point, follow a drift and then question those who were willing to talk, or even those not so willing to talk. I took the opportunity to speak with several individuals who had either come to the U.S.A. for the sole purpose of attending this wedding or to those who were well acquainted with weddings (their own and others') that they had attended in India. With hardly any prodding, they offered their opinions and feelings about the differences, none critical. No Indian, even those who were most likely to know, found fault with the ritual, except to comment on the novelty of the hermeneutic and exegetical exercises in which the priest indulged. They were keen observers of a host of other differences, but these differences seemed to amount to creating a different kind of mood than what they might have recognized in India. One remark in particular stood out for me; this came from a woman in her seventies. After noting that there were far fewer helpers in America (meaning "ritual participants") which made what the priest was doing seem as if it was being done for the first time rather than the reenactment of an ancient rite, she observed: "This is like a school. Everything has a meaning. Very orderly. Lot of explaining." I asked her if the explanations were correct. She responded with a hand gesture and eye movement indicating something between "it doesn't matter" to "who cares!" to "who knows?" Overall, if I were to sum up the responses, at least with respect to the ritual aspect of the wedding, the mood would be characterized as uncertain and unsettled, even if not unsettling. This is what made this wedding a "momentous" one, a synecdoche of the "global moment."

With respect to "mind" I must begin with the only critical commentator on the scene: an American professor of Indian languages who drove those around him to distraction by compulsively commenting on everything in the ritual that was "wrong." He insisted that the translation was wrong, the sequence of rites was wrong, the organizing of space was wrong, it wasn't the way his Pundit had explained it to him, _ad irritatum_. He was an insufferable repository of theoretical knowledge, religious to the core, reminding me of the anthropologist I was twenty-five years ago. Even without the Professor there was a surfeit of mind in New

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3 The nadaswaram is an oboe-like instrument.
Jersey. By mind I include the impulse to reason and to generalize, to theorize. The feasting and
dancing half of the wedding the celebratory half, was seen as distinct and separate from the
ritual half, the solemnizing half. And what was the reaction to the solemn half? Many of the
young Indians thought it was a "learning experience." No surprise in that. The priest was
hell-bent on teaching, preaching, and making the ritual practices explanatorily intelligible as if
the lives of the couple and the young members of the audience—Indian American and
non-Indian American—depended on it. Teacher and students were equally concerned with
both representations and their meanings. As one group of youngsters, all Wall Street success
stories, told me: "the symbolism was neat," and: "It is great to know what all this means." His
American friend chimed in; "It is great to know other belief systems." "We are getting to know
our parents' belief system" echoed another in the group. Everyone agreed.

If one considers learning as the way an organism makes its environment habitable, then
in this mind-dominated mode of learning the cultivation of a way of seeing the world becomes
the dominant way of making one's environment habitable, the dominant way of being in the
world. "Knowing about" becomes the only way to know. The approaches of the anthropolo-
gist, the student of comparative religion and the orientalist, are reenacted in such global
moments. It is assumed that to know a people or a culture is to know about their "beliefs". It
is based on a theological assumption that all human actions are expressions of beliefs; to know
cultures is to have knowledge about the beliefs of these cultures. Through one's belief one
acquires a world-view. Again, nota bene the ocular in world-view. The root model for this way
of being in the world is—even in its incarnation as science—religion, the Christian religion.

To be sure, I am not saying that there is no learning involved in the weddings I witnessed
in South India, but the manner of making one's way in the world, of inhabiting one's
environment, wasn't dominated by "learning about." Learning through being-in-the-world,
learning ontologically, entails more than a way of seeing the world, or learning epistemically.
It is not that representations were not involved in the total context of the 1974 Tamil wedding,
but that the individual was not a mere observer, one who looked at, and if adequately
educated, looked through, representations—be they icons, indexes or symbols—as if they were
mirrors that would reflect or reveal a further reality. For every participant himself or herself
was a representation, a sign. "Man (sic) is a symbol," Peirce wrote (1932: 189). What one has
here then is not a cogito or an agent in a world of representations or signs, merely looking at,
decoding, interpreting and explaining them, but rather, men and women who are themselves
signs and therefore immersed in a semeiotic ontology, a semeiotic being-in-the-world. In such
a world, what is important is not how well one makes mental representations of what is "really
going on," but rather how one as a sign among signs finds one's niche, one's place, one's angle
of repose or the direction of flow. And this calls for more than a theoretical knowledge of what
signs in ritual mean or even to know what the world is. It is even more than knowing what
ritual signs do. It entails knowing one's place among signs, ritual signs included. This entails
more than knowing the world through seeing the world; it calls for knowing the world through
a more comprehensive being-in-the-world, which the very notion of a traditionless of tradition-
free religion could only partially accommodate.

Over thirty-three years ago Clifford Geertz wrote a much-celebrated and widely reprinted
essay called, "Religion as a Cultural System." He starts the essay with a very economical and
elegant definition of religion and then goes on to parse the definition in the rest of his essay. It
is a definition that has been thoroughly informed by the history of definition-writing and has
done the finest job of filtering all the problematic dross of earlier attempts. "Religion," he wrote:

Is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1973:90).

Talal Asad revisited this essay a few years ago and has subjected it to a brilliant critique pointing out, among other things that

It is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power. It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth (1993-41).

Quite apart from drawing your attention to the denial of the dimensions of power, by a symbolic analysis and understanding of religion, I wish to draw your attention to the curious fact that Geertz's definition of religion is such that it could serve equally well for a definition of culture. Correspondingly, were we to consider Durkheim's definition of the sacred, it would coincide with his definition of society. These coincidences are not accidental. For both in Christianity and in the cultures of the western world, the symbolic dominates. Symbols stand for something else; symbols are about something other than themselves; the better the symbols, the truer their representations, the more defensible the belief in them. Christianity has always been about the truth in representations, and conversely, about false representations, false beliefs and false prophets. Hindus, in their multitude of practices, are not concerned with truth in this representational form. The same goes for Buddhists, Jains, Shintoists, Taoists, or for that matter, for what goes under the label of Native American "religions". If the symbolic dominates religion and cultures of the western world, it has also rendered performatives into symbols, and judges cultures where the performative is the norm by symbolic standards. Thus for Durkheim and most anthropological analysts, ritual is a symbol. Whereas in India, the symbol itself may be experienced as a performative; thus transforming the symbol into a ritual (Balagangadhara 1994:480). Ritual refers not to the performance of acts that instantiate practical knowledge, but to the performance of recursive acts. Balagangadhara observes that, "the social environment created in such a culture will itself be recursive, exhibiting the properties of recursive systems" (1994:465). In recursive systems, the mood matters more than the moment. In non-recursive systems, it is the moment that matters and those who are in such a system must perforce be mindful of the moment, mindful of the moment's escape from or transgression of mind. The New Jersey wedding was such a moment of mindfulness in which the mood was, if anything, one of uncertainty.

Furthermore, in a semeiotic mode—be it religious or otherwise—in which the symbolic dominates, we may observe the separation of the representation from the represented, signifier from signified, words from things, and things from persons. Webb Keane, in a very perceptive essay on missionaries and the making of modern (also read, Christian) subjects of their converts in the island of Sumba, remarks that "central to the Christianization of twentieth century Sumba is an effort to correct what appears to the missionary to be an illicit conflation of words, things and persons" (Keane 1996:138). Indeed, ritual is fraught with such confusions. Theory, in the form of the Christian religion, tries to reason away such confusions,
because they are deemed false; and in so doing leaves a *religio* without *traditio*; or alternately stated, it emancipates *religio* from *traditio*.

**Buddhism Becomes a “Religion”**

If the making of Hinduism has been a long drawn—and still unfinished—affair, the making of Buddhism happened quite swiftly, within a span of seventy years. The best book to date on the making of Buddhism is Phillip Almond’s The British Discovery of Buddhism.

The great Indian Historian Romila Thapar holds that the constructions of Buddhism and Hinduism are no older than 200 years (1993:77). According to Almond, Buddhism is a nineteenth century religion. It was first discovered as a religion “out there” in the Orient as part of the heathen Other. But it was rediscovered in the Orientalist present as a theorizable object, which happened to be located in the West. This relocation came about through the progressive collection, translation, and the publication of its textual *past*. Buddhism, by 1860, had come to exist, not in the Orient, but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West, in its texts and manuscripts, at the desks of the Western savants who interpreted it. By the middle of the century, the Buddhism that existed ‘out there’ was beginning to be judged by a West that alone knew what Buddhism was, is, and ought to be. The essence of Buddhism came to be seen as expressed not ‘out there’ in the Orient, but in the West through the West’s control of Buddhism’s own textual past (Almond 1988:12-13).

The West had discovered, not one Buddhism, but two: philosophical Buddhism and popular Buddhism. This is a distinction that has lasted to this very day.

Buddhism, as practiced in the East, “compared unfavorably with its ideal textual exemplifications contained in the libraries, universities, colonial offices, and missionary societies of the West.” (1988:37) Popular Buddhism was portrayed as a betrayal of Asia’s Martin Luther, Gautama Buddha, who had attempted to dislodge “the superstitions and rituals with which the Brahman priesthood had enshrouded India, [and take] religion back to its simple and pure origins.” This was a view to which Max Muller had given broad currency (Clausen 1975:7).

In Sri Lanka Buddhism congeals into a religion in the nineteenth century as part of a wave of “reform movements” that swept over South Asia. In India, Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) founded the Brahmo Samaj, Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883) founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, and Narendranath Datta (1863-1902) better known as Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897. In Sri Lanka, the leading reformer was Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Strict etymology notwithstanding, “Reformation,” used in a religious context, does not carry the connotation of something being formed anew or even an improvement on the existing state of affairs. Rather, ever since Luther, “reformation” has implied returning to a better original. In fact, however, the so-called reformation movements in India and Sri Lanka were reactive responses to the challenge of Christianity. Dharmapala emphasized that his movement was not a reform movement but a renaissance. Much that was formed, however, in the nineteenth century in Buddhism and Hinduism was not so much a renewal or restoration of something lost in time but the making of something that was totally new: two new religions.
These South Asian reformers were baited, as it were, into accepting a challenge thrown out by the Christian missionaries, a challenge to play a very serious game. This game was called “religion.” In Sri Lanka, one of the forms in which this game played itself out was through public debates. These debates had been staged since the mid-1840s. As might be expected, initially, the South Asians faced a stacked deck. The rules of the game were Christian; the game itself was Christian. And in general, the missionaries had used their debating skills to overwhelm some diffident and not very erudite representatives of the indigenous traditions (de Silva 1965:340). The verbal confrontations, purportedly intended to critically examine the tenets of Buddhism and Christianity, would end up demonstrating to the audience gathered for the occasion the superiority of Christianity. By the 1860s the balance shifted. By all accounts, the Buddhists were beginning to gain the upper hand in debate. In a series of five debates between 1865 and 1873, a very erudite monk by the name of Migettuvatte Gunananda established himself as the “terror of the missionaries.”

The Christians may have lost the debate but they helped found another religion called Buddhism, no longer a radical and resolute Other but an “other,” reducible to the Same. A religious rival perhaps, but nonetheless a member of the club of religions; and therefore, reducible, assimilable, totalizable and annulable. In fact, the west had founded two religions: philosophical Buddhism and folk Buddhism, a distinction that paralleled the one made for Hinduism between textual tradition and popular Hinduism. It is a distinction that lasts to this very day. On the part of the Sri Lankan Buddhist reformers, they too no longer confronted a radical Other, whom they could treat with indifference, but a religious rival. To quote the young Indo-American at the New Jersey Hindu wedding, they came to know (merely) “what all this means.” Some might have even found that “the symbolism was neat.”

Anagarika Dharmapala was as complex a man as he was brilliant. His brand of renaissance-Buddhism heralded in many changes the effects of which—some good, some bad, some intended, some not—are with us to this day. In many ways, he sowed the wind and generations thereafter, we reap the whirlwind. The nationalism which was born with the Buddhist reformation helped Sri Lanka throw out the colonizer but also helped usher in Sinhala Buddhist Chauvinism and its ugly antidote, Tamil Tigerism. But before drifting too far afield from my theme I wish to bring this paper to a close by considering one particular change that Dharmapala brought about. It concerns a Buddhist institution called the dharmadesana.

Dharmadesana is often translated as the Buddhist sermon. At first blush, from a Christian (especially Protestant) point of view, as a “sermon,” it would appear to stand in favorable contrast to Hindu (mindless) ritual. A sermon, it would seem, is always about something. And remember, it is this “aboutness”, this provision of a model of the cosmos is what distinguishes the Semitic religions in general and Christianity in particular. But the way in which the dharmadesana was practiced in pre-“reformation” times in Sri Lanka (and is still practiced in certain quarters of the island) was anything but sermon-like, if a sermon is thought of as an expository, even edificational, holding-forth. H.L. Seneviratne who devotes almost a chapter to the subject remarks that the doctrinal content of the dharmadesana was insignificant (1999). It consisted of the following sequence:

4 On the important distinction between the Same (le Même), the other (l’autre) and the Other (l’Autrui) See Levinas (1969).
1. The arrival of the preacher
2. Giving merit for the _dharmasana_, first time
3. The invitation to preach, in _gatha_ and _prasa_ (verses)
4. Giving merit for the _dharmasana_, second time
5. Invitation to the gods
6. Verses of _namaskara_
7. _Prasa_ on benefits of hearing _bana_, lullabically
8. Benefits of _bana_, second time, in a different literary mode
9. The _sutra_
10. Commentary
11. _Maitrivarnana_
12. Giving of merit
13. Gift giving to the preacher

Seneviratne continues:

A look at this sequence makes it clear that the doctrinal content is limited to the core of the _sutra_ and the commentary. Even there the _sutra_ is not understood, because it is in Pali. Even the commentary may well be in another text, Pali or Sinhala which, is also memorized by the preacher and chanted. The appeal of this was more poetic or musical within an overall stricture of religious [sic?] emotion. It is possible that some preachers improvised and got across to the more educated or more intellectually inclined listeners some of the doctrinal content. But for the majority the sound was the message, the act of hearing itself being understood as generative of merit. This is brought out by the emphasis made in the quoted passage to the importance of the voice, its melodic quality, and the lullabic element. [...] There is the idea of performance. (Seneviratne 1999:45-46)

Prof. Seneviratne is an anthropologist at the University of Virginia who was trained in the great tradition of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and whose admiration for the _Protestant Ethic_ amounts to idolization. As I continue to cite him you will see where his own biases lie. They lie with the “essence of religion,” in the reason-able, which is to be found in the textual tradition understood by the reflective few, not among “ordinary people” and “folk” practices.

The author uses the term _pavatvanava_ to mean delivery of the sermon, a term suggestive more of a performance than an exposition of doctrinal concepts. What we see here is the kind of elementary rendering of the religion into aesthetic performance which was encouraged and did achieve its fullest development in Hinduism (music and dance), but discouraged by the Theravada orthodoxy. The evolution of dramatic forms was more successful in the folk healing rituals where the orthodoxy had no say. For ordinary people however this ceremonialism, and not any abstruse doctrines, constituted the essence of religion. (Seneviratne 1999:46)

This new _dharmadesana_ was a radical departure from the traditional. It was confined to about one hour, a remarkable shrinkage into one twelfth of its original duration. Next, it was free of the elaborate ritualism that conferred on the traditional _dharmadesana_ most of its length. It was not a performance in the same sense as the traditional one was, and lacked the dramatic elements we noted in it. Above all it focussed on a theme, a feature structurally integrated to the sermon in the form of a Pali verse that the preacher chanted...
explicitly recognizing it as the theme (mātrka). While there are some precedents for this in the mediaeval Sinhala literary works which were essentially dharmadesana in written form, the new dharmadesana in its succinctness and unity resembled more the sermon that emanated from the Christian pulpit, like the ones which the young Dharmapala heard over and over again at the corrugated metal roofed hall in Keyser Street. (Seneviratne 1999:49)

Religion and Collective Violence

Of history and culture I have said a great deal, even if only through the examination of the historico-cultural phenomenon called religion and its workings in the South Asian context. But what relationship might war have to religion, in so far as religion is understood in terms of the prototype, the Christian religion? Here I tread on a very speculative surface.

To be sure, wars have existed before Christianity and in cultures that were—even if not absolutely, then relatively—untouched by Christianity. The great Indian epic, the Mahabharata and the Greek epics of mighty battles are not about beliefs but about practices; they are expressions of existential as well as ontological conundrums and dystopia. The same could be said of so called tribal warfare studied by anthropologists. Even when they are not wholly ritualistic they are still about disturbances of intra- and extra-somatic spaces and attempts at restoring bodily (social and individual) malaise that result from such disturbances. It is tempting to render these wars in ocular terms such as: “this war is the result of two sides not seeing eye to eye.” Or, slipping into belief terms that explain, for example, the battles between Saivites and Jains of the 9th century, as the result of two different belief systems. Or even more anachronistically, make assertions such as, “the Vaishnavites and Shivites fought because they believed in different gods.” Belief or seeing may have constituted part of the reason(s) for such wars but never invariably, or dominantly, or solely so. When it comes to Judaism, one could through the looking glass of the present, see the battles recorded in the Old Testament as having been caused by the two parties’ different (religious) beliefs. It is worth noting, however, that the words “belief” and “believing” occur only five times in the Old Testament. Compare this with the New Testament where the words in question occur in over forty instances.

Do battles and wars that result from not seeing eye-to-eye or from subscribing to incompatible beliefs any different from those that result from different forms of being-in-the-world? Here is where I step onto the icy surface of abductive inference and hypothesis-making. The distinctive feature of the optic or the ocular, whether it operates actually or figuratively, in memory or thought alone, it is the mode most capable of providing a human being the privilege of distance. Certainly, distance can be near or far. Regardless, it is with distance that we are most capable of singling out our object of obsession—be it friend or foe. The capacity for distancing enables us to both separate ourselves from the object as well as focus upon the object as the other. When the other senses are allowed an equal sway on and access to our being-in-the-world, such an act of distancing is neither easy nor—in cultures that do not privilege the ocular—desirable. In this more inclusive way of being-in-the-world the separation of subject and object, agent and patient, is much more transient. One is a being among beings. One is a being alongside other beings. And being-in-the-world becomes a being-with. In such a world, disturbances to one’s being-in-the-world, cannot be sustained for long. A state of
equilibrium has to be recovered. To live in a state of ontological imbalance becomes unbearable. And if the multiple senses help confuse and confound animosities they also help adjust and appease them. In short, I would hold that in an ocularly constituted world, antagonisms can be and are sustained in focus for a much longer time than in cultural worlds that do not privilege the ocular. Correspondingly, the emotions that sustain war and the reasons for warfare are also far more intense in both domination and duration where belief reigns supreme. And religious belief, is the eye's most powerful figural extension, and therefore, warfare's' strongest ally. Beings differentiate but accommodate; beliefs set out to de-differentiate and thereby violate. Being makes mutual adjustments and adaptations sufficient; beliefs make intolerance necessary.

There is a place called Katharagama in the south of Sri Lanka. Its reigning deity was Skanda, one of the sons of Siva. When I was a child I visited the temple of Skanda. It was a place for ritual, possession, passion and trance. Mood was everything. The body was involved in worship: it was pierced, it swung from hooks, and it bore heavy burdens called kavadi. There were no sermons. There was no one to tell you what it was all about. The devotees were Sinhalas and Tamils. There were no Hindus to be contrasted with Buddhists. Even though it was a quarter of a century after Anagarika Dharmapala’s death, it was a time when Hindus worshipped the Buddha and Buddhists worshipped deities of the Hindu pantheon. I was the only observer. I was an eleven-year-old Christian voyeur. I had accompanied some of my non-Christian Sinhala and Tamil school friends. I had come secretly, without my parents permission, to watch the heathens go into ecstasy.

Since the outbreak of the Sinhala-Tamil civil war in 1983, Buddhist Sinhalas have begun to claim the shrine as Buddhist (meaning, not Tamil/Hindu). A certain “sanitization” of Katharagama has begun. Sinhalese and Tamils pilgrims realize that something momentous is happening. The nation has entered Katharagama and so has religion. When I visited Katharagama again in 1994 I noticed that the mood of the place was changing. It had become mindful of nation and mindful of religion. It has also become mindful of symbol. I picked up a booklet, written for the English-speaking tourist, which began a symbolic explanation of certain rituals with the words: “In the Buddhist and Hindu worldview.” It would not surprise me to discover that the anonymous author had read some anthropology. Religion and worldview produce a specific kind of knowledge, viz., theoretical knowledge. And Balagangadhara is right when he observes that “the necessity and indispensability of world views is the secularized version of a theological belief (Balagangadhara 1994:429). Anthropologists who look for a people’s or a culture’s worldview in order to tell it apart from another people’s or culture’s worldview, are merely religionists in another guise. Does one need a worldview to find one’s way in the world? Does one need a religion? The pilgrim’s at Katharagama did not seem to think so; at least not in 1968. Times have changed. On the day of my visit in 1994, there were signs of a storm in the sky. But the real concern in my group of pilgrims was of a different kind of storm, the eye of which was religious nationalism. Times had changed. It was a time for suicide bombers and true believers, and it seemed like something momentous could happen without warning. The moment, though on a far more ominous note, seemed as uncertain as the moment which, in New Jersey, was called a “Hindu” wedding. The word was out that one must at least have a point of view if not a world-view. The question is: must all other ways of being in the world sooner or later be arrogated by the blind spot of religion? This I believe is the question for this global moment.
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