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The Invention Of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved In The Language Of Pluralism



Synopsis

The idea of "world religions" expresses a vague commitment to multiculturalism. Not merely a descriptive concept, "world religions" is actually a particular ethos, a pluralist ideology, a logic of classification, and a form of knowledge that has shaped the study of religion and infiltrated ordinary language. In this ambitious study, Tomoko Masuzawa examines the emergence of "world religions" in modern European thought. Devoting particular attention to the relation between the comparative study of language and the nascent science of religion, she demonstrates how new classifications of language and race caused Buddhism and Islam to gain special significance, as these religions came to be seen in opposing terms-Aryan on one hand and Semitic on the other. Masuzawa also explores the complex relation of "world religions" to Protestant theology, from the hierarchical ordering of religions typical of the Christian supremacists of the nineteenth century to the aspirations of early twentieth-century theologian Ernst Troeltsch, who embraced the pluralist logic of "world religions" and by so doing sought to reclaim the universalist destiny of European modernity.

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Customer Reviews

Tomoko Masuzawa teaches European intellectual history and critical theory at the University of Michigan, where she holds a joint appointment in the Department of History and the Program in Comparative Literature. She is the author of *In Search of Dream Time: The Quest for the Origin of Religion*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

In the 19th Century and before, Christianity was assumed by Westerners to be the universal religion that underlay Europe's universalist aspirations. By the 20th Century, that Christian universalism had been replaced by a list of 11 or so world religions. By the 20th Century, it appears, Europeans had got off their high hobby horse, and were acknowledging that their Christian religion was only one of many religions. What happened to all that historical universalistic fervour, Masuzawa asks in her book? The discourse on world religions grew so massive in the 20th Century that Masuzawa does not take us beyond its early decades. Yet, her references to the state of the art then, do not seem so different to the way in which issues are still presented today. Christianity and theology have taken a major thump, lost some of their audience, lost their universalist hegemony, lost much prestige. It is not Christianity but secularism that according to contemporary 20th Century logic brings peace and unity to our world. But yet mysteriously, following the loss of Christianity's universalism, we now all know, it seems, that religion itself is universal. It is just that religion wears different clothes according to its locale. Hence we have different world religions. Masuzawa leads us down a few historical trails to help us better understand the wider picture. There was something called comparative theology. This was a booming discipline in the 19th Century. Through it, numerous high quality scholars through great scholarly endeavours demonstrated the superiority of Christianity over everyone else's theology. Then in the 20th Century those books were written off. For the last 100 years, no one has read them. The whole discipline has been condemned as biased, self-centred, triumphalist, egotistic and just poor grossly unscientific claptrap. Yet, Masuzawa asks; can things be so simple? Another not-irrelevant rabbit trail Masuzawa takes us on, is an exploration of philology, on the basis of which it was decided that Semitic languages (and, subsequently also Semitic peoples) were inferior to Aryans (Europeans, and many Asians). By the time the philological (linguistic) arguments for such Aryan superiority were discredited, the notion of Aryan superiority was already so deeply ingrained, that Aryans were assumed universally superior. From the universal superiority of Christianity, we moved to the universal superiority of the Aryan race. Such should give us pause for thought. There are reasons world religions were selected for inclusion in the world religions list. Historically contingent reasons have subsequently been forgotten. The list of 11 or so world religions appeared in the 20th Century as if fully grown. The same list remains authoritative today. Where did the list come from and how was it put together? Masuzawa tells us. As the list emerged, so did

historicity; a new perspective claiming the present to be contingent on

the accidents of prior eras. This was apparently the nail in the coffin for Christian universalists; they were forced to acknowledge Christianity as being as much a product of history as anyone else's religion. There is something here being concealed. So, not everyone is Christian, but everyone (the world over, through all history) is now assumed to have (or to have had)

religion. What is this newly universal thing

religion? The contemporary widely held assumption of the universality of religion needs, according to Masuzawa, some attention. Religion used to be about what people did; how come it has been transformed to a quality somehow conjured "up out of thin air" a unique sphere of life (313)? When examined closely, religion always seems to approximate to the very same Western Protestant Christianity whose universalistic aspirations were so abruptly curtailed. Are contemporary people right to assume that all people everywhere have religion that just takes various different shapes and sizes? Not at all, says Masuzawa. From 19th Century efforts at sharing the Gospel with all and sundry, we have moved into a 20th Century when religion (i.e. Western Protestant Christianity, i.e. the Gospel) is assumed already to have been appropriated by all and sundry. Hence Europe managed, in a move that appears to demonstrate great humility, to conceal its universalistic aspirations under a cover of world religions. The discovery of world religions was a process of Western Protestantism being, sometimes almost by default, transposed onto other people's ways of life. (This is the origin of secularism, as without religion one cannot have secularism.) World religions have been reified by processing them through Western theological screens, Masuzawa tells us! Thus they are inventions, exotically shaped versions of Western Protestant Christianity, designed to combine being exotic with being palatable to Europeans. Masuzawa makes her historic case at great length and with great diligence. Her book ends with an enigma; what does all this mean? It means that Europe's global Christianisation project continues apace but under wraps. As under wraps, it is not fronted as Christianity, but as secularism (on the assumption that the other things it meets are religions, i.e. that they resemble Western Protestant

Christianity). As a result, outside of the Christian West, religion remains a mystery, unknown. Others might have been able to comprehend that mystery had they had access to the Gospel known by Europeans; but that is now hidden from them. Instead we get a globe with apparently many autonomous centres of religious and secular activity that remain in actuality tied to the apron strings of a self-denying (with a false humility) Mother-Christian-faith, now concealed, in Europe.

If you are interested in the history of the study of religion, then (and only then) this is an absolutely great text. First of all, Masuzawa does well what she sets out to do: explore the prehistory of the idea of "world religions" and thus the fascinating background to the activity of "comparative religion." She considers contributions of often neglected scholars, especially in the tradition of Christian apologetics, but even better, in the French academic tradition before Durkheim. That is rarely visited terrain! She also presents familiar figures, especially Max Muller and Ernest Troeltsch, in unusual lights, and makes her case strongly. If you're looking for that, you will enjoy this book as much as I did. Unfortunately, I cannot recommend this at all to anyone unfamiliar with comparative religion: you have to start with Huston Smith and other "world religions" texts; and if you begin to suspect that they oversimplify their subjects for unspoken religious purposes, then you are ripe for this book (and others like it). I even recommend being familiar with the general terrain of the academic study of religion, and if you are not, then I happily recommend Pals' "Seven Theories of Religion" with enthusiasm. More and more fine books in this field appear every year, but that is by far the best introduction that I know of. If you happen to be a fan of folks like Huston Smith, who specialize in "comparative religion"--in which various texts and rituals are taken as representative of a "world religion" or "great tradition" or whatever, and then compared to texts and rituals taken to represent other world religions--then this is a book that might shake you. Unfortunately the author does not dare to make the strong claim that comparative religion is largely nonsense, since scholars claiming to be objective and secular (that is, "scientific") have no right to proclaim any manifestation of a religion as its essence, nor to decide how various widely divergent traditions ought to be grouped together. She hints that secular scholars have no real basis for elevating some traditions to the status of world religions and relegating others to some lesser status. She probably believes scholars with those kind of goals should simply admit that they're doing theology; but she's too cautious to take on those issues here. You can find all this being debated openly in religious studies departments everywhere; Masuzawa contents herself merely to give a little historical background, filled (like most academic books) with viscerously ironic intimations, but defensively mild theses. If you do want to face the issue straight on, you will find little here to help you. For this, I think the best

place to begin may be Jonathan Z. Smith's "Religion, Religions, Religious" in a book titled "Critical Terms for Religious Studies." Finally, I do not ordinarily find myself sympathetic to self-consciously post-modern books - a trait I evidently share with the other reviewers. However, I did not find the post-modernism here troublesome at all, and I doubt most people would. If you're really strongly dedicated to the old Eliade school of religious studies, it might be a little upsetting, but there's a lot of good history in this book - enough to make worthwhile dealing with its theoretical views. (I want to sincerely thank the kind stranger who bought this book for me, finding it on my .com wishlist. It was an excellent, much-appreciated gift.)

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