

## New Religious System for Contemporary Society

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Controversies within religious studies over the categories of religion and religions are reflective of changes in religion that correspond to the historical development of global society in recent centuries. The globalisation of society has created social conditions that encourage the differentiation of religion as a distinct modality of social communication based on binary codes and centred on institutionalised programmes that flow from these. The result has been the gradual construction and imagining of an ambiguous but nonetheless observable and operative global religious system. From its beginnings in early modern Western Christianity, the system has spread haltingly and gradually to the rest of the world. Similar to the way the spread of the global political system brought about the discovery and construction of nations, the development of the religious systems has resulted in the crystallisation of 'religions', especially but not exclusively what we now call the world religions. The examples of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Chinese religion are discussed briefly as illustration.

The purpose of the present article is to inquire into some key sociological conditions that generate this ambiguous situation. My general thesis is that the difficulties and the actual practice are not simply a matter of internal scholarly debate; that the question of religion and religions is more than observers arguing over the best ways to observe a supposedly neutral object. Instead I wish to suggest that the ambiguities reflect a particular social context, one which has brought about changes in what we now call religion and religions. These changes, I suggest, are what is at the root of the academic debates.

The social context and the transformations I refer to concern what recent sociological discussion has begun to call the globalisation of society. The core notion here is that social reality on today's globe has become in an increasingly strong sense singular: social interaction or communication has become so interconnected around the world that it becomes meaningful to speak of a single global society. Globalisation in this debate is significantly more than the popular media and business idea with its primarily economic and technological referents. My thesis then claims that the idea and social reality of religion differentiated from non-religion and of religions distinguished from one another are to a significant extent products and expressions of this historical development; and certainly not merely the mistaken conclusion of observers with a Western cultural or Christian bias, even though such bias is indeed a part of the picture. Moreover, I want to suggest that a useful way

of conceiving these transformations in religion is to speak of the gradual formation or differentiation in the last two centuries of a single global religious system. The ideas of differentiation and system are key to my argument.

A more precise formulation of the hypothesis runs like this: we live today increasingly in a global society whose dominant, but by no means exclusive, structural features are differentiated societal systems centred on function or technique. We have, for instance, the political, legal, economic, scientific, educational, and medical systems. Although in a somewhat ambiguous fashion, among these is a global religious system, one of the constitutive features of which is the internal differentiation of religions or religious traditions. The system and the context in which it has formed raise two persistent boundary, identity, or control questions; namely, how do we differentiate religion from non-religion? and what identifies a religion that allows us to distinguish it from others? Both these questions point to a certain selectivity of this system; it does not and cannot meaningfully include everything that might conceivably count as religious. Moreover, far from ignoring resistance to such differentiation and distinction on the part of both observers and religious actors, the hypothesis includes this in the way the system constitutes and reproduces itself. Resistance, as I show below, can have the paradoxical effect of helping to reproduce the system, not because it is 'wrong' or 'ineffective', but because of the social context in which that resistance takes place.

One feature of this historically globalising context is worth emphasising at the outset. This has to do with the geographical and cultural origins of the historical development which has led to contemporary global society. Simplifying somewhat, it was in Western Europe and then the Americas that the historical 'Great Transformation' began in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, lending the concomitant and subsequent spread of the process around the globe a decidedly Western character. That most definitely does not mean that global society is to be understood simply as the imperialistic spread of Western society around the globe; only that globalisation still bears the marks of its origins. Similarly, the global religious system bears the marks of its origins and early development in Christian society, especially in the way we tend to conceive religion and religions. The contemporary global religious system therefore looks somewhat Christian, not in a religious sense, but only in a sense parallel to the way that globalisation looks like Westernisation. Christianity's conditions of origin and its longer experience with secularised and functionally oriented structures have encouraged many of us to view certain of its responses to the globalising context as characteristically Christian, when it may be more useful to think of them as characteristically modern. Such a view would greatly attenuate—although not negate—accusations that global systems and the global religious system are another way of saying Western imperialism and Christian bias.

The further elaboration, theoretical defense, and illustration of the hypothesis proceed along the following lines: A first section centres on *globality* and consists of a brief look at key structural and cultural aspects of globalisation. The next section focuses on the concept of *system*. Selecting and adapting certain ideas from the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, I consider—again very briefly—some of the constitutive features of modern societal systems, including the possibility of a religious version of these. A third section examines how and to what extent contemporary religion and religions are constituting such a system. I do this in the context of a very selective and illustrative

historical account of the formation of the global religious system. Of prime concern here are how religion and religions have been and are being constructed. A concluding section examines some general features of the system, ones through which the separate religions relate to one another and to their larger societal environment. The prime goal of these last two sections is to show the empirical plausibility of the hypothesis. Proof is the affair of a much more extensive work.

### **Religio-Cultural Structure in Global Society**

The current social-scientific discussion on what can broadly be labelled globalisation has by now yielded several important variations and key contributions, among which the cultural emphasis of Ronald Robertson (1992), the political emphasis of Anthony Giddens (1900; 1991), and the economic emphasis of Immanuel Wallerstein (1979). The first and last of these have thus far probably had the most influence on other participants in the discussion. My own position owes much to the work of Roland Robertson, but with a heavy admixture of elements from the social theories of Niklas Luhmann (cf. 1995). Here a brief summary will suffice to describe the context in which I see the global religious system forming.

The view begins with the idea that the exceedingly complex process that led to the modern transformation of Western European society over the last centuries had at its structural core a shift in how that society formed its dominant social subunits. Where once the most salient divisions were between hierarchically related social strata or estates, for instance between nobility and commoners, there arose functionally oriented subsystems that constituted themselves around specialised instrumentalities or modalities of communication: differentiation more according to what we do than who we are. Above all, systems for politics (states), law, economy (capitalist), science, and religion developed gradually with relation to one another, that is, in response to the fact that the others were developing simultaneously, and with no clear hierarchical order among them (cf. Luhmann, 1982).

In the earlier portions of this history, religion as centred on an increasingly bureaucratic Christian church not only differentiated its own specific structures and culture, but also provided important stimuli for other systems; for example, through the growth of canon law, the individualisation of consciousness in the confessional, and the elaboration of rationalised thought in the monasteries and universities. In more recent centuries, however, and especially after the Protestant Reformation, the gradual shift to a primacy of functional systems has proven less favourable for the continued power of religion in Western society. Instead, systems for state-centred politics, positive law, capitalist economy, and empirically-based science have taken over as the most salient forces in that modern society.

The development of these function systems in European society has had as a direct historical consequence the gradual creation of global society. More specifically, the increasing independence of the function systems from each other and interdependence with each other allowed their accelerated instrumental effectiveness; to such an extent that the European carriers were eventually able to introduce them throughout the inhabited world. It is in this sense that Western imperialism was the historical antecedent of contemporary globalisation.

These basic structural factors are, however, only one aspect of globalisation. Virtually from the beginning, the expansion of these function systems brought their European carriers into much more than incidental contact with a variety of different peoples and civilisations, along with their religious expressions. The prevailing response on the part of the Europeans was to dismiss these 'others' as precisely uncivilised and therefore in need of (European and Christian) civilisation. In certain cases, however, some Europeans were after a time both impressed and influenced by those they encountered. The level of cultural complexity and achievement of especially Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian civilisations was no doubt in part responsible for such exceptions; and it is no coincidence that these latter are also the homes of several religions that would eventually come to be regarded as world religions, that is, standard subsystems of the global religious system. Equally if not more important in such appreciation, but above all, identification of the religiously and culturally other were developments within the Western sphere itself, most notably the rise of politically enabled distinctions among Western cultural nations, which made it logical to find nations (or races) everywhere (cf. Anderson, 1991); and the isolation of the categories of religion and the religions, in large part because of the consequences of functional differentiation and resultant confessional splits in Christianity.

Among the Westerners, this differentiation of nations/cultures and religions reached its 'take-off' period in the 18th and especially the 19th century, a period that coincided with the consolidation of European expansion into precisely those civilisational regions just mentioned. Since the later 19th and 20th centuries, non-Western regions have joined in this process of mutual self-identification, with perhaps the most obvious manifestation being the rise of non-Western nation-states. This greater appropriation by these regions of the dominant globalising and functionally oriented instrumentalities in response to Western imperialism has included the identification and social construction of non-Western religions as distinct entities comparable to, but different from, especially Christianity. One critical result is that, along with the global spread and eventual appropriation of the instrumentalities, contemporary globalisation also has as a defining and strictly related cultural aspect the mutual recognition of collective cultural units, albeit units that are always contextualised or relativised by the structural dominance of function subsystems, including the religious (Beyer, 1994: 45–69).

In this last regard, religion during this historical process, somewhat like the state, has shown an important ambiguity or tension between its potential character as a universal technical orientation and an identifier of particular collectivities. As the Western and non-Western civilisations encountered each other, religion became, along with and sometimes even in opposition to the idea of nation, one of the increasingly differentiated loci of identity or, in Anderson's phrase, 'imagined community' (1991; cf. Thapar, 1989). Similar in this regard to the state-centred global political system, religion has become both a universal modality that all humankind has putatively in common, and a way of identifying difference.

### **Religion as a Function System**

The reader unfamiliar with sociological systems theory, especially the Luhmannian version, may at this stage in the presentation be wondering precisely what a function system is supposed to

be. Here cannot be the place for dealing with this question in any thorough way. A brief consideration of main characteristic can, however, serve at least to avoid certain misunderstandings. Above all, one must avoid the idea that a religious version of such a system is simply the sum of all religious activities, groups, organisations, and cultures that occur in today's world. A system is something much more selective and constructed than that, something much intentional and operative: it is more than an abstract concept. It structures what we do as well as what we think. What I mean by a religious system is not a mere agglomeration of religious 'things', but rather the social differentiation and social construction of a recognisably religious category of action or way of communicating which manifests itself primarily through numerous equally recognisable social institutions<sup>4</sup>. The religious system is the institutional expression of the category of religion.

From a Luhmannian perspective, a social system is an entity that constitutes itself through the continuous and recursive production of connected series of communications based on meaning. The communications (and not people) are the basic elements of a social system. They are possible only on the basis of meaning; meaning provides their context and thereby connects them. Through meaning, new communications refer to other or previous communications and this recursiveness constitutes the closure or boundedness of the system, distinguishing the system from what it is not, namely its environment. It is only through this closure that the system of communications can be open to its environment. A simple although ultimately misleading parallel is a language. We can communicate about a wide variety of themes using a language, but in so doing we are limited to what the words and grammatical structures of that language can express. That limitation is necessary if we are to be able to communicate at all, and this includes the ability to communicate about something new. Closure is a necessary condition for openness.

A simple example of a social system is an interaction, say a conversation at a street corner between two people. This system arises, operates according to various simplifying and mutually expected ordering rules which constitute its closure, but is in principle open to a variety of themes and communicative events that the participants (as environment of the system) may introduce. The interaction system continues as long as the communication does. Social systems are thus formed that allow us to constitute world for ourselves, but only indirectly through such ultimately circular and selective or contingent arrangements.

Modern function systems are also social systems, but of a different kind. They do not get their identity directly from the interaction of human beings, but through focusing on a particular mode of communication and the special institutions that carry it out. Take for instance a modern economy. This system centres on the exchange of ownership of products or commodities. The exchange is the core economic communication. The system does not predetermine what will be exchanged, only how it will be exchanged. In principle, anything can be commodified and exchanged through purchase. The system of the economy constitutes itself through such purchases which transfer ownership from one partner to another. At the heart of the system is the distinction between owning and not owning (that is, property), an organising distinction that Luhmann calls a *binary coding*. In the modern economy, the complex processes of production, consumption, pricing, and capital formation all centre around the difference between owning/not owning, the two poles linked through the idea and social action of buying.

We could approach the other function systems through an analogous description of their root binary codings, their constitutive elements, and the programmatic institutions built around them. Examples of other binary codings are expedient/inexpedient (politic/impolitic) in the political system, legal/illegal in the legal system, healthy/unhealthy (or sick/well) in the medical system, or true/false in the science system. In each case, as with economy, we have a particular way of approaching the world, a particular specialised technique which can in principle be applied to anything. Although these systems are highly selective and thus partial, they also tend to be totalising: virtually anything can be commodified, politicised, medicalised, be subject to scientific investigation, and so forth. This does not mean that everything is or will be observed or, to use Habermas' phrase, 'colonised' by these systems. Growing beans in my backyard and eating them in my kitchen is not an element of the modern economic system. I would have to sell them. Similarly, getting a cold and staying in bed is not as such an action of the modern medical system. Diagnosis and treatment through a medical institution would be. This does not, of course, exclude that either the beans or the cold will be understood by me in economic or medical terms; but for systems to be produced and reproduced, there must be communication and this requires partners who communicate and understand.

Here cannot be the place to defend in any detail the contemporary existence and dominance of these systems. My concern is rather to explore the notion that there has developed—or at least is in the process of developing—a globally extended religious version of these. For this purpose, the important questions concern what constitutes this system as a religious system and how it has formed historically. What we are looking for is the historical development of a notion of religion around which differentiated religious institutions can form, ones which are recognisably and operationally distinct from what is not religion, for example, from economy, polity, law, medicine, education, or, more generally, culture. This will be an inherently *selective* enterprise in the sense that only such communication as conforms to the institutional model will form and reproduce the system. Just as economy is centred on exchange and not simply on the production and consumption of goods or services; just as the educational system constructs itself around attendance at schools and not more broadly around any learning whatever; so we must look for the historical emergence in concrete social reality of a characteristically religious form of communication, with corresponding elements, institutions, and binary codings that reconstruct the world from a specifically religious perspective. This will be an inherently *selective* enterprise that will favour some forms over others, thus appearing as a distortion to those that do not like how the selection happens. It is this selectivity which, I suggest, is at the root of the ambiguity surrounding the notion of religions in contemporary scholarly study of religions. Modern 'Hinduism', for instance, is not everything that the conglomerate of South Asian religious traditions has been or could be. It is a selective re-vision of the past with new things added on for the sake of viability in the present global social context. It is not simply the continuation of 'a religion' that has actually existed historically since, say, Vedic times and before.

The question of what counts as religion in the modern context is not, however, all that simple and straightforward. This is a problem not just of theory or observation, but also for concrete religion itself. I have suggested elsewhere (Beyer, 1994) that the overall religious binary coding is the distinction between transcendent and immanent; but actual religions of today invariably operate more directly with secondary versions of this (e.g., salvation/damnation or ignorance/enlightenment).

The typically religious form of communication is easier to discern: it involves the direct or indirect communication with 'spiritual' or non-empirical partners or sources of agency (and thus includes the possibility of non-theistic partners), something akin to what Eliade (1959) called 'hierophany'. The plausibility of my thesis, however, does not rest solely or even primarily on such abstract considerations. Rather than continue in this general view, therefore, I turn now to an illustrative overview of the historical development of the religious system over the last several centuries, especially the last two. In the course of this presentation, I deal more closely with questions of basic religious elements, binary codings of religion, and the question of how this system has constituted itself in terms of a plurality of religions analogous, but in no sense identical to, the formation of nations and states as the primary actors in a global political system.

The Historical Construction of Religions in a Global Religious System. I outlined how the institutional differentiation of religion in Western European society of the medieval and early modern period played an important role in the differentiation and development of the other, now more dominant function systems, notably science, state, and economy. Christian institutions were, however, not just a general resource used by the carriers of emerging state, economy, and science to further their own projects. Christianity as specialised religion, relatively distinct from these other three, was also a result. The well-known power of the medieval church was one manifestation of this process; but so, eventually, was the Protestant Reformation and Catholic counter-Reformation which led to the establishment and corresponding conception of not only religion as a distinct enterprise, but also of the 'religions' (cf. Despland, 1979). For religion, differentiation led to religious pluralism. Just as the emerging political system yielded states and not the state, so the emerging Western religious system resulted in religions and not just religion. The simultaneous rise of states and national churches in the early modern period is, from this perspective, not surprising.

The present approach must ask, however, on what basis was this religious differentiation accomplished? This is a way of asking what binary coding emerged as the characteristic one for religion. In this Christian case, the reasonably clear answer is the distinction between salvation and damnation, but to some extent with the support of the moral code, good/bad. The Christian church claimed to control access to the good of salvation through its structures and programs, in the Roman church above all through its sacraments. Differentiation on the basis of this code or codes did not happen all at once, of course. In the later Middle Ages (roughly 1100–1500) the Roman church became rather more of a multifunctional institution, recognising such distinctions as between the 'two swords' and 'reason and revelation', but insisting that the power or knowledge connected to salvation was primary and extended to other spheres such as science and education. With the Protestant Reformation, this logic of difference went a step further with the insistence that salvation was not determined by the criteria of other functional areas, that it was by 'faith alone'. The success of the Reformers, of course, depended largely on the ability of the rising political states to challenge the power of the Roman church precisely in its multifunctionality. The development of the various function systems, far from being some sort of autonomous process in each case, depended on several of the developing at once.<sup>5</sup>

If salvation/damnation was the code around which medieval and early modern Europeans constructed their religious beliefs and ritual practice, it was only one aspect of how religious instances

responded and contributed to the development of a new and different societal context. Another very important dimension, with strong precedent in earlier Christianity, was the further *organisation* of religion. Especially in Western Europe, the Christian church during the earlier Middle Ages was the only unifying presence largely because of its internal organisation. Later, the Rome-centred church greatly accelerated this historical tendency when faced with the rising challenge of political powers. With the confessional splits brought on by the Protestant Reformation, the churches, now plural, far from abandoning the tactic, continued it, especially in the form of attachments of certain church organisations to certain political states.

Religion, not for the first time in this story, so to speak hitched its wagon to other functionally oriented institutions (and vice versa, of course). This again resulted in various protest movements that wanted to 'restore' the functional purity of the church, leading to a multitude of Protestant churches, most frequently organised along sectarian and then denominational lines. In the British-based colonial countries of North America and Australasia, denominational organisation became the prevailing form of religious organisation after the late 18th century precisely as a response to the logic of functional differentiation (church and state) and its attendant values (inclusion or democratic/voluntary participation) (cf. Beyer, 1997). In the case of the largest such Christian organisation, the Roman Catholic church, the post-Tridentine period saw the continuation of the strategy so as increasingly to fashion this church as a quasi-state (until 1870 even with its own territory), eventually leading to the express sacralisation of the organisation itself in the 19th century.

The prevailing organisational strategy was not a futile one. It allowed Christian religion to maintain strong authority structures and public influence for quite some time, especially by attaching itself to some of the developing function systems, the political at first and most notably, but also the rising educational and later medical systems. Most important for our purposes in this regard, however, was the successful attachment to the Western imperial project which has been at the historical root of modern globalisation. Here we move directly into the formation of the contemporary global religious system.

If the originally Western process of rising function systems tended to assign religion to one social modality among several, essentially situating religion as a partial concern beside non-religious concerns, the imperial expansion of Western powers eventually amplified that relativisation and identification by setting up Christianity as but one religion among many; equal to the others, but not superior. If salvation/damnation become a partial concern in Western society, it became but an alternative for even the religious modality and code in global society.

In spite of this ambiguity or even weakness, the imperial project has led to the globalisation of (an admittedly largely privatised or voluntary) Christianity so that it is now and will likely remain for the foreseeable future, the religion with the largest following in the world. Organisation has been key to this success and not attachment to one or more states. In addition, and far more important for my purposes here, the response patterns which Christian and Christian churches established for appropriating and reacting to the modernisation and globalisation processes have become, if not normative, then certainly the models to which other religions have either conformed or reacted. For better or worse, Christianity has set the prevailing standard for what 'a religion'

looks like. Not through any conviction of some inherent 'truth' in Christianity, but largely because of similarity of social context, other religions in the world have increasingly formed themselves along the Christian pattern, up to and including express resistance to the consequences of globalisation for religion. Thus, for example, not only do we see such phenomena as the 'protestantisation' (laicisation) of Theravada Buddhism and the partial organisation of Hinduism, but also the denominationalisation (and sectarianisation) of Judaism and 'fundamentalisms' among Muslims, the latter complete with politicisation and an emphasis on 'family values' in the bid to support or reclaim public *religious* authority. The result, increasingly, is a multifaceted, ambiguous, and controversial global religious system that constitutes itself through the recursive and continuous production of a recognisable modality of communication, centred on specific codes (more than one!) and corresponding programmes. If this religious system is less powerful and homogeneous than the capitalist economic system, the system of political states or the scientific-technological system, it is nonetheless still a recognisable system. The category of religion as a distinct enterprise has largely been institutionalised around the globe.

The pattern of formation outside the Christian sphere can perhaps best be illustrated in the case of South Asia, not least because previous incorporation of this region into 'Islamdom' did not have similar results. This fact is significant because, in several respects, the British Raj represented just another outside conqueror with a different religious identification. Indeed, from a religious perspective, the Muslims ruled longer and converted more South Asians. In other words, they seemed to constitute a greater and longer lasting 'threat to Hinduism' than did the supposedly Christian British; and yet it was only under the British that we see among Hindus and non-Hindus deliberate attempts to 'imagine' a unified religious tradition or community that could be labelled Hinduism. This entity, in spite of the tremendous religious diversity that the term was meant to cover, has come to be seen by observers and practitioners alike as a single religion beside others, as an example of a general category. The comparative emphasis is the most important distinguishing feature from previous systematising efforts such as that of Shankara or Ramanuja: the new identity is constructed with reference to others.

Yet it was not simply the awareness of religious plurality that made the difference; nor was it the advent of religious conflict. These had an exceedingly long history in South Asia. Instead, it was the functionally differentiated social context that the British introduced. Included under this heading would be a wide variety of institutions and technologies. The introduction and rapid spread of printing made it possible to sharpen and solidify religious differences and to spread successful formulations in a uniform manner over far greater areas and to far more people; and this often in express competition with representatives of 'other' religions, especially Islam and Christianity. Other technologies such as the railroad enhanced the process. Incorporation of Indians into colonial administration, army, and eventually government along 'ethno-religious' (communal) ones intensified the logic of indentifying religions, with the residual category being 'Hinduism.' European scholars with a decidedly Christian bias looked for, found, and helped revive broader interest in Hindu (and other) 'scriptures', especially the Vedas, Upanishads, and Epics, thus identifying a written basis for the religion parallel to the Middle Eastern religious traditions. And the colonial legal and political system was frequently used to help define what authoritative Hinduism (or other religion) was in a

particular area. In these last two cases especially, European and Indian elites combined to further the process: it was in no sense a unidirectional one in which the colonial powers or the Western observers simply imposed their view of things on the natives.

Out of this complex context emerged various organised movements, such as the Brahma Samaj, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Arya Samaj, the (European based!) Theosophists, the Bharat Dharma Mahamandala, more recently the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, to mention but a few. The prevalence of organisational strategy again manifests itself. Such movements did not deliver a uniform vision of what constitutes Hinduism; and the question of secondary codes can in fact not be answered straightforwardly in this case. Nonetheless, they allowed the observable emergence of patterns of religious practice that together constituted Hinduism. The fact that this process was inconceivable without the parallel rise of first Indian nationalism (including its explicitly Hindu variants) and then the Indian state itself only underscores the degree to which the functional differentiation of religion in global society is part and parcel of the institutionalisation of function systems as its dominant structures.

Although developments within South Asia itself were the primary ones, other aspects and events have significantly strengthened the identification of Hinduism as religious tradition among others. Two examples stand out and are often mentioned in the literature. The first is Swami Vivekananda's performance at the First World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Not only did this follower of Ramakrishna impress the Christian organisers who still felt secure in the, to them, self-evident superiority of their religion; Vivekananda was much hailed in India itself simply because he demonstrated to Christians and Westerners the value and wisdom of Hindu culture. Religion, his admirers believed, was one area in which India had something to teach the West. The story attests to the status of religion as a global modality; it is the spiritual modality beside all the material ones.

The second example concerns the exporting of Hinduism to other parts of the globe both through missions and migration. Well before the 1960s, before ISKCON and the Maharishi Maheshyogi, Westerners were attracted by the Wisdom of the East. And through the medium of the British Empire, South Asians migrated around the world, carrying their religious identity (a disproportionate number were in fact Sikhs, whose religious identity was also being solidified during the time under discussion and in a like manner) with them. Most often, living in a different place has encouraged these migrants to reconstruct, organise, and identify 'their religion' both for themselves and for the non-Hindus around them. Hinduism, whatever the difficulties in saying precisely what it is, whatever the protests that to speak like this is to impose Western categories where they are inappropriate, is now a 'world religion' in identity, in self-conception, and in social reality.

This sort of analysis can be carried out for other religions as well. In a short article, however, it is not possible to look very closely at too many of them. Therefore, I restrict my remaining comments to two cases, Islam and Chinese religion, because they illustrate two different aspects of the historical process. In the first case, we have a clear example of how the religion/non-religion distinction is problematic in global society and how that furthers the development of a global religious system rather than hindering it. In the second case, the identification and construction process has not

happened, thereby illustrating the non-necessity and even fragility of the system, and perhaps the hypothesis itself.

If the chief transformations with regard to my question of a global religious system in Eastern religions have been in terms of the religion/religion distinction, the problem of constructing comparative identity; then Islam displays in more acute form than any of the others the difficulty of the religion/non-religion distinction. Islam, like the others, has undergone various transformations as the areas in which it is dominant have been incorporated into the global system. In this regard, the later 20th century has given particular prominence to movements and forms that resist secularisation and privatisation explicitly by denying or attempting to deny the religion/non-religion distinction in the case of their tradition. It is far from uncommon to hear the cry coming from devout Muslims: ‘Islam is not a religion, it is way of life!’ So strong is this tendency that, at least in part, Islamic orthodoxy today—that is, the core identity of the tradition—is being defined in terms of resistance to the distinction and the secularisation of other spheres of society that it implies. The chief tactics in this regard seem to be, parallel to conservative Christian efforts, to attempt dedifferentiation, at the level of the family and often education in diaspora areas and the legal system (e.g., India) or the state where the concentration of Muslims makes such a strategy viable.

Far from distinguishing Islam as a tradition that is not a religion and therefore not to be counted as a subsystem of the global religious system, the strategy actually contributes to the further delineation and definition of that system and of Islam as a subsystem of it. To begin, the protest that ‘Ours is not a religion’ is common to all the major traditions. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Shintoists insist or have insisted the same thing. Like Muslims, they have pointed out that their religions are holistic and affected all areas of life; they have insisted that rather than being contradictory of science and economics, they are actually the necessary basis of all good science and economy, not to mention politics, law, art, and family life. What distinguishes Islam in this regard is only its comparative success in influencing politics and law in various Muslim countries.

The fact that the protest is to be found emanating from all major religious traditions indicates that the religion/non-religion distinction is problematic for religion. As I discussed above, the functionally differentiated subsystems that are at the structural core of globalisation and thus global society define themselves by their relative independence (but not autarchy) from their fellows. From the perspective of religion, this constitutes secularisation but not necessarily privatisation. The former is not the problem for religion, since all subsystems must deal with this mutual independence. Rather it is the threat or actuality of the latter: the decline of public religious authority. In terms of the religious system, this points precisely to problems with the religious code. For Muslims as for Christians and Buddhists, the question is not whether Islam or Hinduism are religions or ways of life—they are of course both much like capitalism refers both to an economy and a way of life. Instead, the question is ‘how does this religious tradition code the world?’

For Islam the answer has historically been in largest part: *halal/haram*-permitted/forbidden, or simply legal/illegal. If this were to be abandoned, Islam would be left with other secondary codings, especially the moral good/bad and the Abrahamic salvation/damnation. These, however, are problematic in the modern global context in the sense that they have in the cases of Christianity and

Judaism largely lead to the privatisation of religion (cf. Beyer, 1994: pp. 70–96). Accordingly, it is not at all surprising that the core demand of so-called Muslim fundamentalists around the world is that Shari'a be made the law of the land. It is an Islamic way of defending a very powerful *religious* code, but a code that in the modern context has been establishing its independence, especially its independence from religious programmings of it.

In light of this Islamic specificity, the protest that Islam is different is actually an indicator that it is not. Proponents of deprivatised Islam want their religious tradition to remain powerful as religion, not to dissolve it into a generalised aspect of culture. Religious authority is to be strengthened and further institutionalised, not generalised. The protest 'ours is not a religion' is then itself a sign that we are dealing with a religion among others. There are, however, certain 'religious traditions' whose position in the global religious system is more ambiguous or even totally absent. I turn now to the example of Chinese religion.

The Chinese example is in a real sense either the exception that proves the rule or it shows that the question of a global religious system is not tautological: its nonexistence is possible. Chinese society has exhibited a great deal of what generally counts as religion. This complex of religious beliefs and practices has a clear historical and objective interconnectedness: there is an observable unity in the diversity which makes it possible to speak of Chinese religion. Nonetheless, that unity has no generally accepted and clear label nor differentiated institutions that correspond to it. Certainly neither the name Daoism, much less the Western term of Confucianism occupies this place. The anomaly of Chinese religion is therefore not that it should be religion but is not. The anomaly is that Chinese religion as a whole has not undergone the recent identification process so well exemplified especially in the case of Hinduism. Attempts at labelling it as Sinism have remained observers suggestions; they have not become rooted in social reality. The reasons for this state of affairs are multiple and perhaps to some extent uncertain; but one can approach them by looking at the possible reasons that neither Daoism nor Confucianism have filled this role.

If one examines the attitudes of later 19th and early 20th century Chinese elites toward the category of religion, one gets a reasonable idea of not only why no specifically Chinese religion has been constructed, but also the degree to which that failure has everything to do with the category of religion itself and with the globalising context. As China became incorporated into the global system during the 19th and 20th centuries, one of the constant tasks of this elite was to find a way in which China could once again be great, but now as a major actor in the global system, and no longer as the centre of civilisation as such. Essentially, they looked for ways to modernise, with or without Westernising. One reformer, Kang Yuwei, did seriously attempt to institutionalise Confucianism as the religion of the Chinese and as the state religion of China. His attempt failed completely, largely because his fellow modernising elites either rejected the Confucian heritage altogether or considered that the value of that heritage lay precisely in the fact that it was not a religion. Confucianism was superior to Christianity because it was a this-worldly ethical philosophy and not a system for communicating with gods, spirits, or other forms of extra-human agency.

Here, we have no resistance to the restriction of religion to one social sphere among others, but the rejection of the typical social form of religion. These Chinese elites did recognise the category

of religion, and they understood it as centred around 'hierophanic' communication. They recognised religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and sometimes even Daoism. This latter they generally regarded as the embarrassing practices of the superstitious masses; and the former were foreign imports, not or only partially Chinese. Daoist religious leaders did not have the sort of legitimacy that would have allowed them to form broadly based Daoist movements. The modernising leaders who could have been instrumental in the imagining of a modern Chinese religion did not do so because they felt that this would undermine the more important project of reconstructing a viable Chinese identity for the modern and global world.

If we accept this analysis, then the most important conclusion to draw in the present context is that the absence of 'Sinism' and the invention or selective construction of Hinduism stem from analogous circumstances in two different areas of emerging global society. The Chinese have thus far eschewed the category and most of the typical institutional forms of religion as they attempted to appropriate the dominant global systemic forms, mainly the nation-state and the global economy. The Indians embraced the notion of religion in the process of their rather different path to global incorporation.

The examples of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and the Chinese case are of course only very skeletal illustrations. The sole intention here is to show the plausibility of the notion that religion as category and differentiated institutional sphere is of relatively recent historical origin and makes sense in the context of globalisation.

### **Unity in the Differences: the Global Religious System**

The aspect of the overall thesis defended in the previous section is that religions have developed in the last two centuries as the subsystems of a global religious system, much like nation-states have developed as subsystems in the global political system. As with the political system, however, we also have to look at how the subsystems relate to one another in the overall system. This aspect, it must be stressed, is not a logical derivative of the religions themselves: while much of the culture of the religions preexists the system, their constitution as subsystems, as religions of the global religious system does not. The primary unit of analysis is the global religious system. Its religions constitute themselves in terms of the other religions: this means that the relations among them are as constitutive of the system as the traditions themselves.

To being this consideration, it may be helpful to continue the comparison with the more clearly developed political system of states. What are the mechanisms of inter-religious relations that might correspond to those of international relations? What are the equivalents of the United Nations, international diplomacy, and war in the religious sphere. As concerns the first, there is actually very little to find as of yet and this is undoubtedly a main reason for the vagueness of the system, its lack of incontrovertible social existence. The fact that the second World Parliament of Religions met a full 100 years after the first hardly attests to the importance of this global institution. But it may be a start. Under the analogical heading of diplomacy and war there is, however, substantially more. What among Christians is called the ecumenical movement has its interreligious side, above all in the form of interreligious dialogue. Far from being merely a casual talking to each other, such

dialogue is actually better seen as a sort of global religious ritual: the idea is to gain better insight, not only into the other's religious tradition, but into one's own as well. It may be of note that the secondary codings of the different religions cannot operate here alone, lending meaning to the search for some generalised and unifying polarity, perhaps spiritual/ material, even though this one really cannot function as a genuinely religious polarity. The same can be said for efforts to theologise the unity in the form of world theologies, such as that of W.C. Smith or Hans Küng, another instance of observation that is part of the actual formation and reproduction of the system.

The result of interreligious dialogue, however, as with interaction among states, is better mutual identification and not necessarily or just more homogenisation, let alone proselytisation. As in the case of religious representatives who protest the religious categorisation, so interreligious dialogue, even when carried out in 'bad faith' (according to whom?) operates so as to further delineate and perpetuate the global religious system as a differentiated system with its own characteristic communication.

Moving on to the question of inter-religious 'war', the dominant mechanism here is undoubtedly not war at all since most so-called religious wars (e.g., in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Punjab, Israel/Palestine) are only tangentially about religion or at least more expressly about politics (expedient/inexpedient—diplomacy by other means). Instead, more expressly religious words like mission or proselytization are the more appropriate terms. In fact, at this point it is probably better to switch systemic analogies and speak about religious competition rather than war. Religions are neither states nor are they economic corporations, but in this case the corporate comparison is more enlightening.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of missions as important mechanisms of the global religious system points to the fact that this system is not restricted to the religious activities of the more inclusive and tolerant 'liberals' within each tradition. The Pentecostal or Mormon missionary and the migrating Vaishnavite guru reproduce the system as much as and perhaps more than the Dalai Lama or Pope John Paul II. What constitutes the global system is a common modality of communication and not a common attitude to the religiously other. The various missionary and proselytising efforts are instrumental in helping to further define what will count as religion and what forms different religions will take. Here again, the formation of religious movements and religious organisations is probably key. Without them, the religions could not appear as distinct from other modalities.

A final question concern the possibilities of new subsystems of the religious subsystem, that is, new religions. Quite obviously, just as new states can form and certainly new business corporations form all the time, so new religions can form and do so all the time. In many cases, these will be partially on the basis of new hierophanies, partially on the basis of old, as is the case with Wicca, Cao Dai, and Baha'i. In some, such as the possible case of Chinese religion already discussed, we may in the future witness the imagining and identification of a religion that is in most senses quite old. In this category, aboriginal religions in North America and elsewhere, as well as indigenous African religions would perhaps be more current and intriguing candidates. Then, of course, there are the totally new religions or those that are so eclectic as to appear entirely new, such as Scientology or Unificationism. In all these cases, the operative question is, how much are they part of the global religious system.

In one sense, they are so as soon as they construct themselves around religious communication. In a stronger sense, however, they become part of the system when they identify themselves and are identified by observers as religions. This factor raises again a very important last point: to a very significant degree, the religious system of global society depends for its formation and reproduction on observation, as do all systems. Part and parcel of, not only identifying new religions, but also identifying the old ones and the system as such is the effort by both outsiders (including scholars) and insiders to see them, to understand and identify them as religious traditions and as religion, and then to act on that basis. That aspect, as I indicated especially in the short discussion of the imagining of Hinduism, was not only present in the formative period of the system during the last two centuries. It is even more important today. Therefore one might say that my attempt here to observe the global religious system is primarily a scientific task of explanation, but one that also has potential theological consequences. This brings me back, in conclusion, to the ambiguous situation in the contemporary academic study of religion that I discussed at the outset.

Those who say that it is inappropriate to use Christian and Western conceptions of religion to understand other traditions are entirely justified, but only if the object of study is religion before the modern era. When the religion we are examining is contemporary, then such delineation and modelling must become part of the observation simply because that is an important aspect of the religious reality that observers and religious practitioners have in fact constructed and are still in the process of constructing. Here we have the reason that one of the main criteria for qualifying as a 'world religion' is that the religion in question be a 'living' religion (cf. Young, 1992). The category of world religion along with the ambiguities and controversies surrounding it have arisen because the phenomenon under observation has been in the process of forming, and only in that context because we observers cannot escape our cultural biases. Indeed, the recognition of the biases themselves is a symptom of the historical and social object of our observation.

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1. Or other titles such as comparative religions, history of religions, the academic study of religions.
2. A still very useful introduction to the history of the field is offered in Sharpe, 1986. On the problems of extending the field beyond its Western societal base, see several of the contributions in Pye, 1989.
3. It is probably not coincidental that the same period has seen the founding of the International Association for the History of Religions (in 1950) and important regional bodies such as the American Academy of Religion (in 1959).
4. The word here is to be understood in its broad sociological sense of any normative social arrangement or pattern: not just hospitals, schools, and corporations, but holiday celebrations, marriages, and departmental meetings as well.
5. For the parallel case of the development of a states-central political system depending on the parallel development of a capitalist economic system, see Wallerstein, 1974; Elias, 1982.
6. Efforts such as those of Stark and Bainbridge, 1987, to construct economic models for understanding religion are therefore entirely justified; but on my account, they cannot be the basis of a theory of religion because exchange is the centerpiece of the economic modality, not the religious. Similarly, overly communal models of religions which insist that religion is only worth the name when it acts as an integrating sacred canopy also miss the mark. They refer to religion only in certain socio-structural circumstances, namely those in which religion is not differentiated specialised institutions.

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