



Alternative Voices

A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies

Edited by Afe Adogame, Magnus Echtler,
Oliver Freiberger

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Essays in Honor of Ulrich Berner

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Content

<i>Afe Adogame, Magnus Echtler, Oliver Freiberger</i>	
Introduction	9

Part One **“Religion” as a Contested Category**

<i>Gregory D. Alles</i>	
Do <i>Ādivāsīs</i> Have Religion?	
Contesting “Religion” and “Culture” in Eastern Gujarat	21

<i>Dirk Johannsen</i>	
Erschriebene Religion	
Die Vielfalt der Stimmen in den Religionserzählungen des modernen Durchbruchs	36

<i>Johannes Quack</i>	
Aufgabe und Gegenstand der Religionswissenschaft: Von Religion über das religiöse Feld zu Arten der Religiosität	56

Part Two **The Plurality of Voices in Religious, Cultural, and Ethnic Encounters**

<i>Jacob K. Olupona</i>	
The Slaves of Allah	
Ifa Divination Portrayal of Islamic Tradition – An Intertextual Encounter	75

<i>Michael Pye</i>	
Syncretistic Positions in Chinese Temples	86

<i>Luther H. Martin</i>	
The (Surprising Absence of a) Mithras Cult in Roman Egypt	100

Lukas Bormann

Griechen und Juden – Skythen und Barbaren
Ethnizität, kulturelle Dominanz und Marginalität im Neuen Testament 116

Asonzeh Ukah

Prophets for Profit: Pentecostal Authority and Fiscal Accountability
among Nigerian Churches in South Africa 134

Part Three Alternative Voices within Religious Traditions

David Westerlund

Diverging Muslim Views on Health Care in Sweden: An Outline of a
New Research Field 163

Gabriele Cappai

Contested Shari'ah
One Law, Many Interpretations, Diverging Interests 175

Ezra Chitando

Re-opening the Canon: The Transformation of Shona Indigenous
Religion in the Face of HIV and AIDS in Rural Zimbabwe 195

Jörg Rüpke

Was ist ein Heiligtum? Pluralität als Gegenstand der
Religionswissenschaft 211

Wotsuna Khamalwa

Ritual Murders and Wealth Inequality in Modern Uganda 226

Katharina Wilkens

Drinking the Quran, Swallowing the Madonna
Embodied Aesthetics of Popular Healing Practices 243

Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, Theophilus John Angbashim

Neo-Primal Anti-Witchcraft Movements and DMR
A Comparative Study of the *Moavu-Embaga* of the Eggon and *Adzov* of
the Tiv of Central Nigeria 260

Part Four Plurality in the Study of Religion

Christoph Boechinger

Ist religiöse Vielfalt etwas Gutes?

Pluralismus und Pluralität in der Religionswissenschaft 285

James L Cox

The Transmission of an Authoritative Tradition

That without which Religion Is Not Religion 308

James V. Spickard

My Liberation Needs Yours

Ethics, Truth, and Inclusion in Academic Life 324

The Contributors 342

Afe Adogame, Magnus Echtler, Oliver Freiberger

Introduction

As an academic discipline, Religious Studies is at a creative threshold in an increasingly pluralistic era. As a multifarious phenomenon, religion is approached more and more from transdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives. The historical, comparative, and cross-cultural study of religions throughout the world, from antiquity to the present, shows that virtually all traditions have institutional and popular forms that cross-fertilize and mutually reinforce one another. In presenting the histories, development, belief systems, and ritual patterns of specific religious groups, scholarship often privileges the official level of religiosity to the detriment and total neglect of alternative, dissonant, and resurgent voices. Rather than the sole reliance on an official voice, varied dimensions and alternative voices also contribute to enriching our understanding of specific religious traditions or phenomena.

The contributions in this volume serve two purposes. They seek to demonstrate, on the one hand, how listening to alternative voices – in religions and in scholarship about religion – is a quintessential, although often neglected, activity in the academic study of religions. At the same time, they are meant to honor Professor Ulrich Berner, on the occasion of his 65th birthday, and the inspiration his work has given (and continues to give) for studying religion and religions with this plurality approach. Besides, his research interests straddle the religions of late antiquity and contemporary religious forms and experience. It is rare to find scholars of religion who combine these two broad historical epochs. His scholarly interest has been to build a bridge between them rather than treat them as disparate, mutually exclusive eras. He is apt in showing that ‘nothing is really new under the sun’ as far as the history of religions in the world is concerned. He contrasts ancient and extant religious forms and traditions, often drawing significant historical parallels and demonstrating how they are similar and different, and how each phenomenon or tradition is shaped by its respective social, cultural milieu.

Beginning in 1967, Ulrich Berner studied Theology, Philosophy, History of Religions, Indology, and Buddhist Studies at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen where he received his doctoral degree in 1974. His thesis, supervised by Carsten Colpe, analyzed the concepts of soul, immortality, and resurrection in the work of the Alexandrian theologian and philosopher Origen (2nd/3rd century) and argued that the classical phenomenology of

religion had failed to explain such concepts adequately.¹ Right after completing his Ph.D. Ulrich Berner worked as a post-doctoral fellow in the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 13 (*Orientalistik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Religions- und Kulturgeschichte des Vorderen und Mittleren Orients*), first in Colpe's project, then in Gernot Wießner's research group. Subsequently he was assistant professor (*wissenschaftlicher Assistent*) of History of Religions at Göttingen (1978–1984). In 1980 he completed his *Habilitationsschrift* which was published by Harrassowitz in 1982.² In this book he develops a theory (or, as he calls it, a heuristic model) of syncretism that provides a refined terminology for the analysis of religious encounter, based on and advancing sociological systems theory. Analyzing, as a case study, the encounter of Christianity and philosophy in Origen's work, he demonstrates the model's applicability for a concrete historical context. Between 1980 and 1984 Ulrich Berner also taught, as visiting professor, at the universities of Hamburg, Bonn, and Bremen and was a Heisenberg fellow in 1984/1985. In 1986 he was appointed professor and chair of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) at the University of Bayreuth, where he has taught ever since.

Working at Bayreuth University, which was to become a renowned center for African studies, Ulrich Berner developed an additional interest in African religions, first in the religious concepts, imagery and symbolism appropriated by African novelists, then also in new indigenous religious movements in Africa. His activities within the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 214 (*Identität in Afrika*) led to the supervision of a number of doctoral theses, of which the very first was written by one of this book's editors (Afe Adogame), who also worked in the department several years afterwards. Over many years Berner has been involved in African studies and brought a large number of African scholars of religion to Bayreuth – as Ph.D. students, visiting lecturers, Humboldt scholars, or guest researchers –, and over time these activities made Bayreuth the major center for the study of African religions that it is today.

In his research Ulrich Berner also kept pursuing his interests in late antiquity and medieval Europe, as well as in Indian religions. His insistence on reading texts in their original languages manifested in offering regular reading courses in which students discussed relevant texts in Latin and Greek. In addition, a visiting professor was hired to teach Sanskrit. Later the Sanskrit course became a regular offering, taught first by his assistant – another one of this book's editors (Oliver Freiburger) –, and then by Michaela Berner (who, being a language genius, also speaks Arabic fluently and teaches Hebrew at her

1 U. Berner, *Selbstinterpretation und Unsterblichkeitsglaube in Religion und Religionswissenschaft: Untersuchungen über alttestamentliche und frühchristlich-alexandrinische Texte und zur historischen Religionsphänomenologie* (Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität, 1974).

2 U. Berner, *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffes*, Göttinger Orientforschungen: Reihe Grundlagen und Ergebnisse, Band 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1982).

husband's department). At the same time, every semester he ran a colloquium on method and theory in the study of religion, in which advanced and doctoral students discussed classical and current approaches in the study of religion and their applications to their own fields of interest. The colloquium forum has proved invaluable as a theoretical laboratory and methodological breeding ground for most scholars and students who took part in it in the last two decades.

Whoever gets to know Ulrich Berner quickly realizes that his thirst for new and interesting questions, sources, and theories is virtually unquenchable. Besides the fields mentioned above, he discovered fascinating material in places where scholars of religion seldom stray. Being an accomplished flutist, a connoisseur of classical music, and a lover of modern art, he has studied opera librettos, composers' biographies, and the work of modern painters from a religious studies point of view. As the son of a forester, he has a deep interest in analyzing religious conceptions of, and controversies about, nature, animals, and the environment. And he has worked on multiple other topics that range from mission history to analytic philosophy of religion, from the concept of monotheism to that of skepticism and atheism, from the controversial notion of religious tolerance to that of interreligious dialogue, and from large-scale models of religious globalization to the specifics of South African prison gangs. His interests in theory are equally broad, most recently manifest in the application of cognitive models and of Bourdieu's field theory, which has attracted his increasing focus through the research of this book's third editor (Magnus Echter), who studied under Berner and now works as his assistant.

Even more remarkable than the general interest in all such topics is the fact that Ulrich Berner discussed them all in scholarly writing. A large number of publications, mostly journal articles and contributions in edited volumes, along with monographs and edited books, constitute an impressive oeuvre that is as broad as it is deep.³ While the areas and the themes are numerous, we do perceive a certain thread that runs through many, if not most, of his publications. It is a particular approach to religion which, to our knowledge, he has never laid out theoretically in greater detail but which has a powerful presence in his analysis of the material. It is a way of studying religion that takes the plurality of voices in each particular religious context seriously. Refusing to accept the superiority of narratives that are constructed by victorious, privileged fractions of religious communities, this approach insists that scholars of religion must include in their analyses the existing alternative views, opinions, and conceptions in any given moment in history. Following this approach means bringing to light numerous religious beliefs and practices that were neglected by previous scholarship, and exposing the discourses, conflicts, and power relations in any particular context. It forces

3 The complete (and constantly growing) list of his publications is easily accessible online at http://www.relwiss1.uni-bayreuth.de/de/team/Professoren/Berner_Ulrich/.

scholars to study religion as an ever-contested and dynamic process rather than a static institution, as it is normally conceptualized by dominant religious élites. And as he has shown, this approach can also be applied to the history – and present – of the academic study of religion itself.

Among the many scholars who have been inspired by Ulrich Berner's plurality approach are the contributors of this volume. They are colleagues, students, and friends of his, but most of all, they are scholars who enthusiastically agree with his view that listening to alternative voices is not only interesting but methodologically essential for a better understanding of religion. This is the leading principle of the following chapters. They cover many areas that coincide with Ulrich Berner's interests: religious traditions of Africa, Europe, and Asia; areas less commonly studied by scholars of religion, such as literature, law, and atheism; and the discipline of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*). Focusing on the plurality approach, these studies impressively demonstrate its methodological benefits for the academic study of religion.

The volume is thematically arranged into four parts. As the themes overlap, some individual contributions could have well been grouped differently. The main objective of this structure is to suggest major dimensions of the plurality approach that are exemplified in many ways by the individual chapters.

In Part One, "*Religion*" as a Contested Category, the volume begins by addressing discourses about the most fundamental term of Religious Studies as a discipline. The authors discuss the multiple facets of the category "religion" and suggest methodological and theoretical approaches to deal with such problems productively. In the first chapter, Gregory Alles studies the concepts of religion among indigenous people (*ādivāsī*) in contemporary Gujarat (Northwest India). His analysis shows that the emic categories (*dharm*, *saṃskṛti*, *nuṃgra*, *bhagat*) appear as ambiguous and contested as the English terms *religion*, *culture*, *indigenous*, and *Hindu*, into which they are often translated by local actors. Considering the impressive plurality of views that Alles recorded – and that keeps eluding a neat classification –, the question of his title, "Do *Ādivāsīs* have religion?" can best be answered with the remark: "Depends on whom you ask and what terms you use." This plurality of voices helps scholars of religion to become aware of the weakness of the term "religion" as an analytic category. But it also demonstrates that emic terms are not stronger in this respect – and equally contested.

Dirk Johannsen's chapter discusses other interesting sources that few scholars of religion use, let alone specialize in. He analyzes Scandinavian narrative literature in the late 19th century, focusing on two influential novelists. Contrary to a common view in literary studies that there was a "religious crisis" among writers of that period that they eventually overcame, Johannsen suggests that a closer look yields a different conclusion. He shows that while the atheist worldview of those writers persisted, they did recognize religion located inside the individual and acknowledged certain religious

(Christian) ethics. The chapter argues that the voices of the narratives' protagonists not only reflected the authors' worldview but also impacted the readers' (and thus, society's) notion of 'religion' at the time.

Johannes Quack discusses how Ulrich Berner's focus on alternative voices of different actors with differing agendas contributes to the identity formation of the academic discipline *Religionswissenschaft*, and to the circumscription of its subject of study, religion. Quack argues that the concept of the religious field – instead of a *sui generis* definition of religion – expands the subject for the study of religion, as it includes all actors with vested interests in the field, e.g. atheists who challenge the authority of other, usually more traditionally 'religious' actors. Parallel to this expansion of the field of study Quack suggests a shift from 'religion' to 'religiosity,' as the identification of various religiosities – skeptical, dogmatic, fundamentalist, etc. – within one religious tradition, allows for a critique of monolithic conceptions of 'religion.'

Part Two of the volume, *The Plurality of Voices in Religious, Cultural, and Ethnic Encounters*, contains case studies of religious actors responding to 'the other' – religious, cultural, or ethnic – in a variety of ways. *Jacob Olupona's* chapter portrays glimpses of Ifa's encounter with Islam and the inter-textual relations the two traditions maintain. Central to the chapter is not the 'truth' of the narratives but how the Babalawos in their imagination construct the Muslims "other" and the tradition they represent. This kind of interpretation points to processes of religious evolution in Nigeria. Ulrich Berner's greatest legacy, according to Olupona, is that he encourages intertextual and interdisciplinary work. Thus, the central argument of the chapter is to show how the Islamic motifs in Ifa narratives can foster interdisciplinary and cross-cultural scholarship.

Michael Pye's chapter analyzes Chinese temples in contemporary South East Asia (Malaysia and Singapore) and Taiwan. It discusses the ways in which symbolic representations of various religious traditions in those temples are put in a relation to each other through their spatial arrangements, thereby reflecting certain kinds of syncretism. A variety of syncretistic "positions" in syncretistic "situations" reflects a plurality of syncretisms in Chinese temples that defies homogenizing analysis. Pye shows that even within one and the same temple, alternative significations and orientations are observable.

Luther Martin discusses the presence – or rather, absence – of the Mithras cult in Roman Egypt. As the Mithras cult, a religion that was widespread in the Roman Empire, had strong relations with the military and as the Romans had substantial deployments in Egypt, it seems surprising that within the plurality of religions in Egypt the Mithras cult was almost absent. Martin argues that because the competing "indigenous" deities Sarapis and Isis fulfilled many of the religious functions that Mithras addresses as well, the latter's cult did not become as popular there as it did in other regions of the empire. Later, when Christianity, sanctioned by the emperor, became the dominant force, both the Mithras cult in the West and the Sarapis/Isis cult in Egypt were on the decline.

Lukas Bormann's chapter discusses the concept of ethnicity in early Christianity and the latter's encounter with other ethnic groups. It suggests that in this historical context the notion of Christian universalism is ambiguous. Some New Testament texts clearly distinguish Jews and Greeks and encourage proselytization among the latter. But, as Bormann shows, other ethnic groups, namely Scythians and Barbarians, were not viewed as targets for conversion. Originally, Paul's "universalism" did not extend beyond Greeks. Only in later parts of the New Testament alternative views appear that, hesitantly, call for mission among those ethnic groups.

Asonzeh Ukah describes the activities of Nigerian Pentecostal pastors in South Africa. The pastors consider themselves missionaries who bring salvation to the South African blacks whom they conceive as being stuck on the stage of ancestor worship, a result of the long Apartheid history. Being part of the prosperity gospel, the salvation the Nigerians offer includes worldly success, and is therefore validated by the wealth of the pastors. However, it is precisely the pastors' wealth that incites the South African laity to challenge the authority of the pastors with concepts like accountability, religious fraud, or transparency. It is thus in this intercultural context that alternative voices challenge the Nigerian hegemony in African Pentecostalism.

Part Three of the book, *Alternative Voices within Religious Traditions*, addresses the plurality within particular religious traditions and highlights voices that constitute an alternative to the (perceived) dominant view. *David Westerlund's* chapter outlines various Muslim views on health care in Sweden and intra-Muslim debates about such issues. With possibly about 400,000 people who have some kind of Muslim identity, Islam is now an important part of the religious and societal landscape in Sweden. This figure refers to a very heterogeneous group, ranging from strictly practicing individuals to non-practicing agnostics or atheists with "Muslim" names and cultural background. Among practicing Swedish Muslims, there is also a wide variety of different movements, organizations and interpretations of Islam. The chapter's primary focus is on the views of moderately Islamist Muslims who took the initiative in creating and supporting such clinics inspired by Islamic thinking in the primary care sector. A secondary aim is to highlight the opposing attitudes of other Muslims who represent two other main positions or discourses: (1) liberal and often Sufi-influenced critics and (2) more secularly oriented people.

Gabriele Cappai uses the actors' perspective in order to challenge the notion of Sharia as the monolithic and unchanging divine law that governs all aspects of society. He analyses socio-cultural determinants of action on macro- and meso-levels, and distinguishes between three dimensions of action: opportunities, beliefs and interests. Thereby he shows the multi-vocality of an apparently unified phenomenon, as well as the interconnectedness of religious and other socio-cultural factors.

Ezra Chitando's chapter examines the transformation of indigenous beliefs

and practices in rural Zimbabwe. It focuses on how the HIV and AIDS crisis has precipitated a rethinking of “ancestral traditions.” Essentially, the chapter contends that African Indigenous Religions have never been “closed.” Although ideologically there is a conviction that the oracles from the remote past will be upheld by future generations without any changes, in reality these religions have always been open and adaptable. In fact, they share this characteristic with all the religions of the world. No religion can survive without being open, adaptable and syncretistic. In this chapter, the author seeks to illustrate the notion of openness, adaptability and flexibility with special reference to Zimbabwean Indigenous Religions and HIV and AIDS. This chapter has utilised one of Ulrich Berner’s key theoretical insights to demonstrate how, in the face of a deadly epidemic, Shona Indigenous Religion decided to “re-open the canon” in order to promote life in the face of death. Providing effective responses meant rejecting and recasting some of the beliefs and practices. This necessitated the triumph of the subordinate traditions that are always contesting ideological fixation and rigidity within the religious tradition.

Jörg Rüpke asks the question, “What is a sacred site?” but quickly adds that the question should rather be, “When or for whom is a site sacred?” Drawing on many examples from Roman religion, he problematizes the common term “sacred” – or, “The Sacred” – and asks who the actors are that make a cultic site (his preferred term) “sacred”. He also discusses the relationship between space and image in Roman temples and the religious experience related to them as noted in the textual material. To all these issues religious people had multiple and partly contradictory responses. A sacred (or, cultic) site, he concludes, is thus not defined by some aspect of “the sacred” but rather by the religious practices performed at that place and the plurality of emic opinions about its sacredness or non-sacredness.

Wotsuna Khamalwa’s chapter suggests an interconnectedness between ritual practice and socio-economic development, showing that religion is integral to the social fabric of Ugandan society. Religion shapes economic behavior, while economic activities are impacted by religious belief and practice. He maps how the seventies and eighties witnessed a drastic decline in socio-economic development in Uganda after Dictator Idi Amin’s coup d’état in 1971. Since the nineties, there has been steady economic recovery and liberalization of sectors such as media and banking. This recovery has also led to massive rural-urban migration, creating many slum/shanty villages/towns on the low lying outskirts of urban centers, especially the capital Kampala. In the wake of the economic and religious renaissance, the phenomenon of child murders appeared. This chapter explores the link between “ritual murders” and the widening gap between the rich and the poor on the one hand, and the influence of the “prosperity gospel” churches and the “witch doctors” on the other. It shows how mainstream and non-mainstream religions as well as religious specialists are attempting to carve out spaces and a niche for themselves within a neoliberal economy.

Katharina Wilkens's chapter offers invaluable insights into the dynamics of cultural norms and practices by exploring alternative voices and the ritual process of 'drinking the Quran' for healing in Tanzania. According to the actors, the Quran, as the Word of God, has the power to bless and to heal. The direct ingestion of divine blessing offers rich material to the scholar of religion interested in religious practices contested and disparaged by conventional, dominant discourses. Aesthetics of religion lays its focus consequently on embodiment, performance, materiality and sensuality and interprets theological discourses and social power struggles from that perspective. It offers new insights into the plurality of religious practices and neglected voices by opening up new interdisciplinary pathways and methods of analyzing non-textual data. The chapter argues that describing the practice of drinking of the Quran as a material use of literacy techniques for the purpose of healing reveals a material mode of religiosity that should not be glossed as "magic" or "folk religion."

Umar Danfulani's and *Theophilus John Angbashim's* chapter comparatively examines the origin and growth of two anti-witchcraft movements that emerged in the Benue valley of Nigeria as protest movements – the Moavu-embaga of the Eggon and the Adzov of the Tiv in Central Nigeria. The work is situated in ritual performance, especially in anti-witchcraft rituals, rituals of protest, and in gender and cross-gender roles. The study applies Harvey Whitehouse's Divergent Modes of Religiosity (DMR) theory on the Eggon Moavu-embaga and the Tiv Adzov anti-witchcraft movements to measure the development rate from their cult format towards being a full fledged doctrinal religion, using the indices developed by the DMR theory.

Finally, Part Four of the volume, *Plurality in the Study of Religion*, is concerned with theory and methodology in religious studies. Its chapters suggest ways in which the plurality approach can be integrated in the academic study of religion. *Christoph Bochsinger* explores the notion of alternative voices with regard to religious pluralism. He cautions to distinguish between emic and etic concepts, and suggests to use the term religious pluralism as referring to the normative concept that seeks to promote the peaceful living together of various religious traditions, and the term religious plurality to the description of the interaction of religious traditions – whether peaceful or not – based on empirical study. In his view, the study of religion should restrict itself to the study of religious plurality. In practical application, the study of religion could provide secondary school education on religious plurality, in distinction to the religious education offered by the theologies of the various religious traditions, and thus provide an alternative voice to the discourses on religious pluralism.

James Cox's chapter continues the theoretical debate concerning the appropriate relationships between Religious Studies, Theology and the Social Sciences. Following an academic tradition represented broadly by Ninian Smart, Cox attempts to disengage the concept of 'the sacred' or 'divine' from

the core of religion and instead locating the study of religion squarely within social and cultural contexts. In this chapter Cox revisits Walter Capps' discussion on the *sine qua non* of religion – that without which religion is not religion. He takes up Capps' challenge that scholars locate the *sine qua non* of religion, as a starting point in the attempt to separate the sacred from religion and thereby disarm the host of recent critics of Religious Studies. He established a theoretical framework whereby we can lay to rest the connection between the academic study of religion and theology and at the same time maintain a place for Religious Studies as a broadly based but distinct scholarly discipline.

The volume concludes with *James Spickard's* chapter. Spickard argues that despite a longstanding scholarly concern with the distinction between 'facts' and 'values', plus professional canons that separate academics from everyday life, there is an inherent connection between the scholarly attention to intellectual pluralism and a life devoted to expanding opportunities for those whom the academy has traditionally left out. This chapter explores their intellectual nexus in the context of a critique of post-colonial theory's anti-universalism. It argues that scholarly inquiry is grounded, epistemologically, in a post-Enlightenment quest for 'truth', conceived not foundationally but as a regulative ideal – i.e., as an ideal that governs human conduct. This ideal orients inquiry in such a manner as to demand socio-intellectual inclusion rather than exclusion and equality rather than hierarchy. Building on the work of C.S. Pierce, the chapter shows that these are not, as in static epistemologies, matters of a priori value-choice, but are instead matters of practical (and necessary) eschatological faith. Living an academic life in the contemporary world is thus simultaneously a matter of intellectual and moral import, in which the inclusion of under-represented voices plays a central role.

When we began approaching potential contributors for this volume, the response was overwhelming. In spite of the time constraints and the looming peer review connected with this book series, very few on our first list had to decline. The space limits set by the publisher, which we could not match by merely withdrawing our own contributions, put us in an awkward position. Not only did we have to stop approaching potential contributors, we even had to ask some colleagues to withdraw their suggested contributions, to which they gracefully agreed. Many more scholars, too numerous to list here individually, would have liked to contribute to this volume and honor Professor Berner, and we are grateful for their understanding.

We wish to thank the publisher, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, and the editors of the series *Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft* for their support in publishing this volume. Like the series, the book is bilingual, which attests to the national and international impact of Ulrich Berner's work. Finally, we wish to thank the authors who produced superb scholarship that aptly demonstrates the need for, and the benefits of, listening to alternative voices as we study religion.

Part One

“Religion” as a Contested Category

Gregory D. Alles

Do *Ādivāsīs* Have Religion?¹

Contesting “Religion” and “Culture” in Eastern Gujarat

“I would suggest that to call something ‘religion’ in the absence of a comparable indigenous lexeme is not in itself an act of imperialist aggression, but neither is it intellectually sufficient. In support of such usage, one ought to be able to provide a nuanced description of the item in question, informed by local as well as exogenous knowledge, justifying its characterization as ‘religious’.” – Bruce Lincoln²

I was an “illegal alien,” as they say in the U.S. I was required to register within 14 days of entering India, and here I was, sitting in the registration office on day 17. Would it matter that I had a story to tell?

I had accidentally left my papers at home. By the time I got them, on day 12, it was a holiday. The next day, Friday, day 13, I had tried to register in Gandhinagar, where the institution with which I was affiliated was located, but the officer in charge was taking a long weekend. His subordinates told me to go back to Chhota Udepur, where I was living, and register there. On Saturday I tried to do that, only to be told that I was in the wrong place. “Go to Baroda on Monday,” day 16, the officer said. Then he added reassuringly, “Don’t worry. You will get it.” But after a weekend spent gathering documents, a bumpy three-hour bus ride, and a short afternoon’s wait, I did not get it. The Chhota Udepur police had to verify my residence. So after another three-hour bus ride back to Chhota Udepur, a two-hour night-time jeep ride cross country with four police officers in search of my landlady, whom I had never met, a second three-hour bus ride back to Vadodara the next day, and five hours of waiting in

1 The fieldwork on which this essay is based was funded by the Fulbright program administered by the U.S.–Indian Educational Foundation, Delhi. For help in the field I especially want to thank Ashvinbhai Rathva (Kanalva), Dashrath Rathva (Kocvad), Desing Rathva (Rangpur), Govindbhai Rathva (Padharvant), Rajindra Varia (Tejgadh), and Kemraj Bhaghora (Dungargarh, Rajasthan), as well as Dr. Arvind Pratap and his medical team, which took me along for rides. An initial version of this essay was presented at the Congress of the International Association of the History of Religion held in Toronto in August 2010. My thanks for helpful comments are due to the participants there as well as to my colleagues Jill Krebs and Lester Vogel.

2 B. Lincoln, “Concessions, Confessions, Clarifications, Ripostes: By Way of Response to Tim Fitzgerald”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19 (2007): 163–168, on p. 167.

the registration office, I was finally going to meet the person in charge. He would sign my form and make me a legal alien, or so I hoped.

“You are affiliated with an institution in Gandhinagar, but you are living in Chhota Udepur, six hours away, and working at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh [about 15 kilometers from Chhota Udepur]?” I want to study *ādivāsī* [tribal] people, so I need to live where they live. “Then why aren’t you living in Tejgadh, if you’re working in Tejgadh?” I don’t know. There’s no hotel in Tejgadh. I’ve always stayed in Chhota Udepur during shorter visits. It didn’t occur to me to live in Tejgadh. “Why are you registering in Vadodara?” I was told to register in Vadodara, but I’ll register anywhere you tell me to. [Please, just let me register.] “What exactly do you plan to research?” Rāṭhvā religion. “But there is no Rāṭhvā religion. Rāṭhvā is a culture. If you’re interested in religion, you should study Hinduism. Have you studied the classical tradition of Hinduism?”

I have always considered disagreements about the categories of religion and culture to be rather academic. Were they going to get me deported?

This was only the first of many times that I encountered contestations with regard to *ādivāsī dharm* and *saṃskṛti* in Vadodara district, Gujarat. (English speakers in the area usually unreflectively translate these terms “religion” and “culture,” respectively, but for the sake of accuracy I will retain the original Gujarati.) *Ādivāsīs*, India’s “first inhabitants,” commonly known in Indian English as tribals, are sometimes referred to in scholarly parlance as indigenous people, although conservative caste Hindus claim to be indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, too. They constitute about 8 % of the total Indian population, and about 15 % of the population of the state of Gujarat, where they are concentrated in the border regions. One such *ādivāsī* area includes Chhota Udepur and Kavant talukas in Vadodara district (in the process of becoming Chhota Udepur district as this book goes to press), along the border with Madhya Pradesh just north of the Narmada River, where *ādivāsīs*, mostly Rāṭhvās, constitute a large majority of the population.³

In what follows I attempt to map the contestations with regard to *ādivāsī dharm* and *saṃskṛti* that I observed in these talukas, then to reflect a little on where this diversity leaves a scholar of religions like me. At issue is only a subset of the practices – and beliefs, too, but I will talk mostly about practices – among *ādivāsīs* that a neutral scholar might identify as religious, specifically, the subset of practices known locally as *numgra* (in standard Gujarati, *nagurum*, *nūgarum*, “without guru or teacher, irreverent, shameless”). These practices are generally considered to constitute traditional *ādivāsī* practices, as distinct from those “newly” introduced by *bhagat* or devotional movements that mostly originate from within caste Hinduism (Swaminarayan, Sat Kaival,

3 According to the 2001 Census *ādivāsīs* made up 87 % of the population of Chhota Udepur taluka and 93 % of the population of Kavant taluka.

Meladi Ma, and so on).⁴ The most obvious differences between *numgras* and *bhagats* is that *numgras* eat meat and drink alcohol and so slaughter chickens and goats and pour oblations of liquor in their ceremonies. *Bhagats* are (supposed to be) strict vegetarian tee-totallers in every area of life, including those we normally designate religious. As some *numgras* see it, *bhagats* think of themselves as superior to *numgras* and refuse to associate with them on some occasions, such as meals. I also know of several mixed couples, one spouse, usually male, being *numgra*, the other spouse, usually female, being *bhagat*.

Views from Outside

My theme is not lexicographical. I am not concerned here with the proper definitions of the words *dharm* and *samskr̥ti*. It is about how people use these words. A high percentage of *ādivāsīs* in the area are non-literate, and still today one encounters (presumed) teenagers who do not know their ages and have never been to school. That does not mean, however, that people cannot differ on matters of *dharm* and *samskr̥ti*. They not only can but do.

One point is locally uncontested: the practices of caste Hindus are *dharm*, specifically, Hindu *dharm*. The practices of *bhagats* are routinely considered Hindu, so they are unequivocally *dharm*, too. Furthermore, no one that I know of disputes that *Khrīstī dharm* (Christianity) and *Musalmānī dharm* (Islam) are *dharm*s, even if some people take rather dim views of them. The question about *dharm* arises in the case of traditional *ādivāsī* practices, that is, *numgra* practices. Differences of opinion about these practices exist both within and outside of the *ādivāsī* community. They are complicated by the related question of whether *ādivāsīs* are in fact Hindus, as the Census of India has tended to assume.

Some people outside the *ādivāsī* community unhesitatingly consider *numgra* practices to be *dharm*. In my experience they include both Hindus and Christians. Other outsiders, however, like the Superintendent of Police, Vadodara Rural District, who signed my registration papers, do not – although our conversation had been in English, so we had used the word “religion.”

People give different reasons for denying that *numgra* practices are *dharm*. One of them is normative. People holding rather different political

4 For the broader historical context, see, e.g., D. Hardiman, “Assertion, Conversion and Indian Nationalism: Govind’s Movement amongst the Bhils”, in R. Robinson/S. Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255–284, on pp. 257–259, 271, and D. Hardiman, *Histories for the Subordinated* (London: Seagull, 2007), 57–94, 185–252; A. Tilche, *In Search of an Adivasi Worldview: Identity, Development and the Adivasi Museum of Voice in Western India*, Ph.D. dissertation (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011), 90–94.

convictions, for example, both Gandhians and BJP partisans, have customarily considered *ādivāsīs* backward and in need of improvement. *Numgra* practices – eating meat, drinking alcohol, sacrificing animals to *devs* – have been among the most common targets of the moral reformers. On such grounds *numgra* practices have been considered devoid of both *dharm* and *saṃskṛti*, the latter in the sense of “civilization” or capital-c Culture. In these judgments, however, the normative force of *dharm* appears to be stronger than that of *saṃskṛti*, because at least some who adopt this view consider at least some *numgra* practices to be *saṃskṛti* but not *dharm*. For example, several upper caste students at the Government Polytechnic Chhota Udepur, viewing instances of possession among *ādivāsī* women that I had video-recorded, pronounced them to be *saṃskṛti* but not *dharm*. They did so even though a couple of them thought that the *ādivāsī* women really might be possessed by *devs*.

A school principal told me a different tale. In his view *ādivāsī* practices were not *dharm* not because they were backward but because *dharm* was a word properly applied to an entire *samāj* (society). Since *ādivāsīs* belonged to the Hindu *samāj*, their *dharm* was Hindu. Subgroups within the Hindu *samāj*, such as Gujaratis, Marathas, Rajasthanis, Tamils, and also *ādivāsīs*, could and did have their own peculiar traditions. These were not *dharm*; that is, they were not what was done by or expected of everyone of a certain class throughout the community; they were simply local traditions, *saṃskṛti*. On one level this position seems reasonable enough, but it led to some odd conclusions in our conversation. When *ādivāsīs* performed *pūjā* at a Hindu temple, he said, that was *dharm*. When they performed *pūjā* elsewhere, as at the *numgra* ceremony of Pāṅgu where we met and had our conversation, the very same acts were not *dharm* but simply *saṃskṛti*.

I do not want to dismiss such outsider views as cultural chauvinism, nor do I want to suggest that *ādivāsīs* and non-*ādivāsīs* inhabit two entirely separate linguistic communities. After all, *ādivāsīs* were present during my conversation with the principal. But I find it more interesting that *ādivāsīs* disagree among themselves about whether their traditional beliefs and practices constitute *dharm*. The various positions are not as simple as one might suspect.

Surveying the *Dhārmik* Field

The majority of *ādivāsīs* whom I questioned considered *numgra* practices to be *dharm*. That was true whether I was talking with *bhagats* or *numgras*. For example, one *numgra* who had never been to school and who speaks no English insisted that *ādivāsī dharm* was not Hindu *dharm* and that it consisted of such celebrations as Pāṅgu, Gāmsāhī, Holī (with fire-walking and

*golpheadīyo*⁵), Divāso, and Dīvālī. But such summary statements miss much of the complexity on the ground.

In April 2009 I surveyed 26 *ādivāsī* men, ages 16 to 70, with educational attainments ranging from no schooling whatsoever (5 persons) to master's degrees (2 persons); 6 of the 26 had finished high school, and another 9 had finished at least eighth grade. 15 (57.7 %) self-identified as *bhagats*, 11 (42.3 %) as *numgras*. The survey, which had been translated into Rāṭhvī (the local language) by friends and was administered by me orally, asked participants whether they considered various acts to be *dhārmik*, *adhārmik*, or just neutral actions (*mātra kriyā*). It included some actions, such as patricide and eating dirt, intended to ascertain whether participants really understood the task.

Clearly, this survey did not address whether participants considered *numgra* religious practices to be *dharm* or *saṃskṛti*; attempts to do that directly had proved somewhat frustrating. Rather, the survey was designed to explore the range of the *dhārmik/adhārmik* field. In other words, it more directly addressed the range of *nītidharm*, *dharm* as an overarching system of morality, than it did *dharm* as a set of religious practices, a distinction which members of local communities do in fact make. Nevertheless, the survey results are worth considering here, because they get us part of the way to where we want to go. Six of the actions that participants were asked to judge were celebrations (Dīvālī, Divāso, Gāmsāhī, Holī, marriage, and Pāṅgu), one was a basic religious practice (*pūjā*), and two were moral activities that importantly distinguish *bhagats* from *numgras* (eating meat and drinking liquor [*dārū*]). Relevant results include not only the participants' judgments about the *dhārmik* character of these actions but also their identification of their own *dharm*.

There was only one act that every survey participant considered to be *dhārmik*, the festival of Holī. For anyone familiar with the area the prominence of this festival should not be particularly surprising. While Holī is well-known around the world as a Hindu festival, in this area it is also considered the most important *ādivāsī* festival, celebrated with rituals such as fire-walking and the performance of vows that involve, for example, male cross-dressing and smearing the body with oil and ash. As for the other celebrations mentioned, none of the *numgras* considered any of them to be *adhārmik*, but one respondent, the *numgra* with the most formal education, suggested that Dīvālī and Divāso belonged to the category of neutral actions, being neither *dhārmik* nor *adhārmik*, and that marriage might be neutral, too, depending upon the

5 *Golpheadīyo* is still performed today more or less as described in J. Haekel, "Baba Golio, A Festival among the Rathwa Koli, Gujarat", in R. Wiesinger/J. Haekel (eds.), *Contributions to the Swinging Festival in Western Central India* (Vienna: Institut für Völkerkunde, University of Vienna, 1968), 17–29.

circumstances. Another *numgra*, one who had never been to school, also considered Dīvalī to be neutral rather than *dhārmik*.

In their assessment of celebrations, *bhagats* differed significantly from *numgras*. All of them considered Divāso and marriage and, with one exception, Dīvalī to be *dhārmik*, but they expressed more uncertainty about the two traditional *ādivāsī* ceremonies in the list, Gāmsāhī and Pāṅgu. These ceremonies are arguably variations on a single ceremony known as Ind, but if so, they are variations performed by different social groups for different purposes. Gāmsāhī is a celebration of an entire village and its deity, ideally performed once every five years – or so many people told me; Pāṅgu is a celebration during which members of a household and their invited guests consecrate a wall painting known as a Pithora (absent from Gāmsāhī), that has been painted in fulfillment of a personal vow.⁶ The same number of *bhagats* considered both celebrations to be *dhārmik*, nine out of fifteen (60 %), but only seven actually judged both celebrations to be *dhārmik*; four others judged the two celebrations differently. Perhaps because Gāmsāhī is a pan-village celebration in which both *bhagats* and *numgras* ideally participate, *bhagats* displayed more uncertainty about it than about Pāṅgu. Two of them considered Gāmsāhī to be *adhārmik*, one considered it to be neutral, one admitted that some people considered it *dhārmik* even if he did not, and two participants simply could not decide which answer to choose. By contrast, while one *bhagat* again admitted that Pāṅgu was *dhārmik* for some people if not for him, four judged it to be *adhārmik*, and only one could not decide how to answer the question.⁷

In the matter of celebrations, then, only traditional *ādivāsī* celebrations provoked negative judgments, and those only from *bhagats*. Eating meat and drinking liquor elicited sharper responses. Eating meat got slightly more support from *numgras* than drinking alcohol did, but it also received greater condemnation from *bhagats*. Neither practice, however, was either universally accepted or universally condemned by either group.

Of the eleven *numgra* participants, more than half (six) had different assessments of eating meat and drinking liquor. Two *numgras* considered eating meat *adhārmik*, two different *numgras* considered drinking alcohol

6 Discussions of Gāmsāhī appear to be lacking in the literature, but Pithora painting has been much discussed: e.g., J. Jain, *Painted Myths of Creation: Art and Ritual of an Indian Tribe* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1984); V. Pandya, “Rathwa Pithoro: Writing about Writing and Reading Painted Ethnography”, *Visual Anthropology* 17 (2004): 117–161; G.D. Alles, “Pithoro: A Well-Known Unknown God”, *Münchener Indologische Zeitschrift* 1 (2008/2009): 226–232; S. Ratnagar, *Being Tribal* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), 66–71; and A. Tilche, *In Search of an Adivasi Worldview: Identity, Development and the Adivasi Museum of Voice in Western India*, Ph.D. dissertation (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011), 164–195.

7 Only one other action, patricide, elicited a response of uncertainty. This was from the participant with the most formal education, who suggested that in some cases, such as when a father is criminally abusive, patricide might be justified. As a result, one can only judge patricide *dhārmik* or *adhārmik* on a case by case basis.

adhārmik, while seven *numgras* considered meat eating good, as opposed to six who thought the same about drinking liquor. Conversely, three *numgras* considered drinking liquor neutral, while only two thought eating meat was neutral. *Bhagats* were considerably more consistent. Ten out of fifteen considered both meat and liquor *adhārmik*, one considered both of them *dhārmik*, and one considered them neutral. Of the *bhagats* who assessed the two acts differently, all three considered drinking liquor *dhārmik*, but two of them thought that it was *adhārmik* to eat meat, while one suggested that meat eating was *dhārmik* for some people.

In eliciting demographic data, the survey asked participants to name their *dharm*, if they had any. *Bhagats* and *numgras* answered this question on two different levels. All *bhagats* answered by naming a particular devotional movement to which they belonged: Swaminarayan (4), Pragat Purusottam (3), Damoda Maharaj (2), Sat Kaival (2), Holi Mata (1), Kabirpanth (1), Ram Devji (1), and Ramanandi (1). *Numgras* gave more generic descriptions. Six identified their *dharm* as Hindu – two of the six as Hindu-Rāṭhvā – two more as Bābā Dev, another simply as Dev, yet another even more simply as *ādivāsī*, and the last, the most educated of the group, as none.

This survey is hardly conclusive. It involved men – but only men – chosen at random from three different parts of the area that interests me, the northeast, the southeast, and the west, but the sample size is small: nine participants from the northeast, of whom three were *numgra*; nine participants from the southeast, of whom seven were *numgra*; and eight participants from the west, of whom only one was *numgra*. Furthermore, the survey asked people to do a task for which many were unprepared. Although twenty-six people participated, an even larger number preferred simply to watch. They declined to participate because they perceived the survey as too difficult, perhaps because it reminded them of school exercises, even if they had never attended school themselves. A fuller study of the range of *nītidharm* in this area would require more participants, including women, and would need to employ additional techniques, such as telling stories and asking people to suggest missing words.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make a couple of preliminary suggestions here relevant to our theme. Although especially *bhagats* found drinking liquor and eating meat problematic, the majority of both *bhagats* and *numgras* were prepared to consider traditional *ādivāsī* celebrations such as Gāmsāhī and Pāngu to be *dhārmik*. Furthermore, although *numgras* were fairly generic in naming their *dharm*, all but one self-identified as having a *dharm*, and six did so in terms that marked their *dharm* out as distinctly *ādivāsī* (Ādivāsī, [Bābā] Dev, Hindu-Rāṭhvā). The *numgra* who identified his *dharm* as “none” restricted the force of the *dhārmik*/*adhārmik* pair to the narrowest range, but he still considered Hoḷī, Gāmsāhī, Pāngu, and *pūjā* – and only these – to be unequivocally *dhārmik*. At the same time, he preferred to think that activities such as these constituted *ādivāsī saṃskṛti*, not *ādivāsī dharm*. In other words, practices can be *dhārmik* and still be considered *saṃskṛti*, not *dharm*.

Dharm or Saṃskṛti?

It is necessary to be a little more precise about two of the terms I have been using. The words *numgra* and *bhagat* do not quite refer to two sets of *dharm*s. A *bhagat* is a *bhagat* to the extent that he or she self-identifies with a *dharm* or, more technically, with a Hindu *saṃpradāya*; a *numgra*, however, may not identify with any *dharm*, or she or he may identify with a *dharm* that has nothing to do with *numgra dhārmik* practices. For example, I asked (in the local language, Rāthvī-bhāṣā) the *numgra* mentioned at the end of the last paragraph what his *dharm* was, and he replied in (self-taught) English, “I have no religion. I believe in tribal culture (i. e., *saṃskṛti*) and tribal ceremony (i. e., *vidhi*). How else will it be preserved?” Another *numgra*, who was not included in the survey but whom I know extremely well, is a practicing *ādivāsī* Catholic. He counts as a *numgra* because he eats meat, drinks alcohol, participates in tribal ceremonies such as Gāmsāhī, and makes offerings at the memorial shrine for his ancestors. Indeed, although I have been glossing *numgra* as “traditional *ādivāsī*,” I am myself a *numgra*. So are a Methodist English professor and a caste Hindu doctor that I know. That is because all three of us eat meat and drink alcohol – and occasionally participate in *numgra* festivals and ceremonies.

This qualification aside, all of the other *numgras* whom I surveyed identified with a *dharm* that consisted of the same traditional practices, even if they called it by different names. Some even identified their *dharm* as Hindu, although there is in fact no agreement within the community about whether traditional *numgra* practices should be considered Hindu. At issue is the place of the *ādivāsī* community in the social, cultural, and political mix that is contemporary Indian society, especially in a strongly pro-upper-caste-Hindu state like Gujarat. In this context, those who insist on *ādivāsī* distinctiveness may not only insist that their traditional practices are not Hindu *dharm* but also that these practices are not *dharm* at all. They are in fact *ādivāsī saṃskṛti*.

In the course of qualitative data gathering, I have occasionally asked *ādivāsīs* why they considered practices such as Gāmsāhī to be not just *dhārmik* – good things to do – but also *dharm*, whether *ādivāsī dharm* or Hindu *dharm* or both. Almost no one came up with an answer to so blunt a question. At one Pāngu celebration, however, two men in their early thirties who self-identified as Hindu-Rāthvā (not survey participants) gave me a very specific answer: Pāngu is *dharm*, they said, because *dev* is there. *Dev* is present in the line of branches set up to receive *pūjā*. He or, when the village *dev* is female, she is present in the *baḍvo* (the ritualist) when he shakes his head vigorously up and down, transmits messages from the *dev*, and impersonates the *dev* during dances. She or he is also present in the goats and chickens, entering their bodies when *mantras* are recited over them and water is sprinkled on their heads and inducing them to twitch their heads suddenly so as to communicate

that they agree to be killed. When I asked whether these practices were not in fact *saṃskṛti* rather than *dharm*, they agreed that they were *saṃskṛti* but, they said, they were *dhārmik saṃskṛti*.

The word *dev* is, of course, etymologically related to the Latin word *deus* and the English word “deity,” but we should pause before jumping to the conclusion that, when it comes to *dharm* as a category, Rāṭhvās turn out to be Tyloorean animists. Perhaps some are, but not all. For one thing, some Rāṭhvās make a distinction between *dev* and Bhagvān that is difficult to capture with the English words “God” and “Lord” but that seems somewhat stable, since it appears in the literature on the community as long as fifty years ago.⁸ If some *nuṃgras* consider traditional celebrations and *vidhis* to be *dharm* because they are directed to a *dev* or *devs*, other *nuṃgras* do not consider them to be *dharm* for precisely the same reason: because they are directed to a *dev* or *devs*. On this second view, *dharm* is limited to activities directed to Bhagvān. Activities directed to one or another *dev* or to one’s human predecessors that do not involve Bhagvān are thus not *dharm*; they are *saṃskṛti*. That does not, however, make them less important. Such a distinction parallels, of course, the view which sees *bhagat* practices but not traditional ones as *dharm*.

Ādivāsīs occasionally reject the classification of *nuṃgra* practices as *dharm* on other grounds, too. It is quite common for educated ādivāsīs to emphasize the closeness of ādivāsī life to *prakṛti*, nature. One ādivāsī friend, writing in an issue of the Gujarati journal *Ādilok*, observes: “From the beginning of time ādivāsīs have worshiped nature. ... Wherever ādivāsīs live, they have the most intimate connections with rivers, brooks, mountains, hills, trees, stones, insects, other living creatures, and fodder. For these people their surroundings are worthy of being revered (*pūjya*).”⁹ In an editorial in an earlier issue of the same magazine, another ādivāsī friend begins his discussion of the ādivāsī worldview with extensive references to Chief Seattle’s alleged speech to the President of the United States.¹⁰ (In Gujarati, Native Americans are referred to as ādivāsīs, too.) Such an ecological consciousness among ādivāsīs also provides a basis for rejecting the classification of traditional ādivāsī practices as *dharm*. As some well-educated ādivāsīs have told me, *dharm* is directed to what is beyond nature, but traditional ādivāsī practices involve interaction with and reverence for nature, that is, *prakṛti*. As a result, these traditional practices are not *dharm*; they are *saṃskṛti*.

Another group of *nuṃgras* also finds the classification of traditional ādivāsī practices as *saṃskṛti* rather than *dharm* to be useful, namely, those who wish to identify with a different ideology than Hinduism but to retain *nuṃgra*

8 E. Stiglmayr, “Die Kultpfähle der Rathwa-Bhilala”, in *Festschrift Paul Schebesta zum 75. Geburtstag, gewidmet von Mitbrüdern, Freunden und Schülern*, Studia Instituti Anthropos 18 (Vienna: St. Gabriel-Verlag, 1963), 371 – 380, on p. 377.

9 S. Gamit, “Bharthār”, *Ādilok* 2.4 (2010): 37.

10 J. Vasava, “Ādivāsī dr̥ṣṭikon thakī viṣvane mārgdarśan”, *Ādilok* 2.1 (2010): 3 – 4.

practices. This is true of the *numgra* in my survey who gave his *dharm* as none. Highly educated, he is a convinced Marxist who wants to reject religion but loves dancing in the traditional ceremonies. Classifying these ceremonies as *saṃskṛti* allows him to do so with a clear conscience. The Catholic *numgra* mentioned earlier is in somewhat the same position. He does not see participation in traditional *ādivāsī* ceremonies as antithetical to his Catholic identity, because for him they are *saṃskṛti*, not *dharm*. This view is, in fact, one that the local Catholic church, in the form of the Salesian fathers who run the local Don Bosco school, has been promoting. A visitor to the Don Bosco compound encounters memorial stones, Pithoras, and other traditional artefacts that some *numgras* would think of as *dharm*. In early 2009 the school sponsored a Pāngu conducted by one of the most revered older *baḍva* in the area, Narsinh *baḍvo* of Ganthiya village, who died in early 2010. The priests have adapted these forms to Catholic teachings. For example, one memorial stone is dedicated to Don Bosco, and the Pithora painted in 2009 idiosyncratically contains representations of Bible stories. Even so, the priests do not consider these practices and artefacts *dharm*. They include such traditional observances in their programs because they do not want their students to forget their own *saṃskṛti*.¹¹

I want to mention just one further rationale for considering traditional *ādivāsī* practices to be *saṃskṛti* rather than *dharm*. I heard it from a young *ādivāsī* professor of English who spent a year studying in Leeds. Religion, he said in English, is serious. It has rules that must be observed, and it requires that everything be fresh and pure, including the participants, who must bathe before celebrations. Religion is also complex, and it defies literacy and comprehension. For example, it is impossible fully to understand religious texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, even when an expert explains them. Furthermore, religion is prescriptive; it tells people what to do. It is also exclusive; it is closed to outsiders. Finally, religion is neither interesting nor enjoyable; in fact, it is quite boring. I asked him for an example of religion, and he gave me two: *yajña*, Hindu “sacrifice,” and *kathā*, recitations, as in recitations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Morari Bapu. Both, he said, were entirely uninteresting. I asked if there was anything in *ādivāsī paramparā* (tradition) that he would consider religious. (Our conversation alternated between English and Gujarati.) His answer was no. For him to speak of *ādivāsī* traditions as *dharm* rather than *saṃskṛti* would be to denigrate them.

Thus, while some *numgras*, probably the majority, and some *bhagats* as well think of traditional *ādivāsī* practices as *dharm*, whether Hindu or *ādivāsī dharm*, others reject this identification. They do so on various grounds, but

11 I asked the priest most responsible for these practices, a non-*ādivāsī* of Goan origin who is extremely popular with the *ādivāsī* community, non-Catholic as well as Catholic, how what the school was doing related to other Catholic formulations and experiences, such as the Chinese rites controversy. He replied that he did not think too deeply about such matters.

especially the last three rationales that I mentioned reject the identification to the same effect: they allow *numgras* to value their traditions positively and so to participate in them. I cannot say how widespread these views are. I am tempted to suggest that classifying traditional practices as *samskṛti* rather than *dharm* is a strategy of an emerging educated elite which wants to retain the *numgra* practices that Gandhian and Bhājap partisans as well as *bhagats* reject as backward. They do so, however, not by rejecting the denial that traditional *ādivāsī* practices are *dharm* but rather by embracing it. As a result, when people in eastern Vadodara district, Gujarat, insist that traditional *ādivāsī* practices are not *dharm* but *samskṛti*, they do so in pursuit of two diametrically opposed ends. Those who assume that *dharm* is a good thing and that Hindu *dharm* is the ultimate *dharm* do so in order to reject *ādivāsī* practices and embrace *dharm*. Those who want to preserve traditional practices do so in order to reject *dharm* and embrace tradition. The first want to save *ādivāsīs* from their backwardness; the second want to save their traditions from Hindu eliminationists. Both, however, use the distinction between *dharm* and *samskṛti* to inscribe categorical difference: difference between two kinds of practice, between opposed values and ideals, between what Hindus do and what *ādivāsīs* have traditionally done – in other words, difference between themselves and others. In effect, for these people, the question of *ādivāsī* identity is bound up with contestations about religion and culture.

Consequences

I once asked a professor of history at S. N. College in Chhota Udepur, himself an *ādivāsī* but from northern Gujarat, whether he considered *numgra* celebrations and *vidhis* to be *dharm* or just *samskṛti*. “You’re the expert,” he replied. “You tell me.”¹²

According to a once-common view, anthropologists – and one supposes scholars of religions, too – studied what was common within a population – “collective representation[s] attributed to a whole social group,” as Dan Sperber has written.¹³ This view seems to have informed many conversations about whether the category “religion” is properly applied to various beliefs, practices, and traditions. Never mind the possible culturally homogeneous reading of Lincoln’s reference to “local knowledge” in my epigraph. The question has often been framed lexicographically: Do they, or do they not, have a word corresponding to ‘religion’? – as if having a common vocabulary implied that the people being studied, unlike the people studying, shared an agreed-upon view of the world. At an extreme such an approach led to the

¹² He also expressed the view that Pāṅgu was not *dharm* but only *samskṛti*.

¹³ D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 35.

ethno-sociological project, which in South Asia sought, as one of the project's classics put it, to see "India through Hindu categories."¹⁴

This attempt is problematical, not only because it too easily conflates first and second order vocabulary and prematurely precludes elucidation that might come from comparison,¹⁵ but also because it conflates India and Hindu in a way that ignores other inhabitants of the subcontinent. On the latter point, it is not enough simply to adjust the operative terms and seek, for example, to see *ādivāsīs* through *ādivāsī* categories. Like people everywhere, *ādivāsīs* have multiple, divergent, and sometimes diametrically opposed views. Even if they agree on how to describe a practice – this man is cutting [i.e., killing, sacrificing] the goat and giving its liver to such and such a *dev* – they may still categorize the practice differently, for example, as either *dharm* or *saṃskṛti*.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments in the study of language and thought cross-culturally in the last two decades has been the way in which some cognitive linguists and others have rejected strong versions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and emphasized the extent to which human beings, in the realm of basic-level, human-scale phenomena share a common-sense view of the world.¹⁶ This unity, it is said, is so obvious that it is often simply taken for granted. On the basis of the single example discussed here, I am hardly going to suggest that when it comes to higher-level categorization, human beings share not a common-sense view of the world but similar conceptual problems, such as whether to classify various actions and beliefs as "religion" or "culture," *dharm* or *saṃskṛti*. Perhaps so, but I suspect that higher-order categorization is too flexible and diverse for that to be the case, even granting the role of metaphor in the formation of such categories.¹⁷ What I want to suggest instead is that the examination of how "religion" is conceived in contexts that we study should not be simply a matter of lexicography. It is not enough for scholars of religions to know what words mean. Nor should we assume that ideas about "religion" contribute to a shared, agreed upon body of local knowledge. At least in this particular case, but I suspect in others as well,

14 M. Marriott (ed.), *India Through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi: Sage, 1990); R.H. Davis, "Ethnosociology", in S. Mittal/G. Thursby (eds.), *Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 125 – 138.

15 Cf., perhaps surprisingly, P. Chatterjee, "Classes, Capital and Indian Democracy", *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 46 (November 15 – 21, 2008): 89 – 93, on p. 90: "I am skeptical of theoretical claims that the social scientific analysis of Indian society requires ... its own theoretical concepts. The assertion of some sort of 'uniqueness of India,' it seems to me, denies to us the wealth of comparative resources that more general theoretical frameworks allow and needlessly imprison us within the scholarly fortifications built by the Indologist."

16 Among others, S. Atran, *Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Languages* (New York: W. Morrow, 1994); and E. Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

17 G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

it is more instructive – and also more interesting – to examine and explore the discussions and disagreements people have about topics about which we disagree and discuss, too.

David Chidester has shown in exemplary fashion how the question of whether indigenous people had religion was contested on the South African frontier.¹⁸ When indigenous people were perceived as military threats, they were considered to be savages without religion; when they were subjugated, they were found to have religion. Chidester also notes that indigenous people were themselves engaged in comparative religious endeavours, trying to make sense of the practices and claims of the interlopers from Europe. His focus, however, is on the conceptions of European colonizers, and the historical correlation between lack of religion and savagery should make us at least pause before answering my title question in the negative.

In Chhota Udepur and Kavant talukas, too, one finds inter-communal dynamics at work, but in this case the dynamics are not between indigenous people and British colonizers but between *ādivāsīs* and “mainstream” society, the latter represented largely by various more or less actively proselytizing Hindu communities but also by Christian communities and secular ideologies such as Marxism. At issue is not military conquest but cultural – or religious – hegemony. Nor is there here a simple one-to-one identification of civilization with *dharm* and savagery with lack of *dharm*. There are, to be sure, hints of that equation but, like the academic question of religion or culture, the issue also concerns the proper categorization of particular forms of social order and activity. In this context, however, denying that *numgra* practices are *dharm* turns out to be a multipurpose strategy. It is not simply a strategy used by *ādivāsīs* (since I am concentrating on their views, not those of outsiders) who want to assimilate into the mainstream; it is also a way for *ādivāsīs* to resist that assimilation or – in the case of people who deny that *numgra* practices are *dharm* so that they can participate in them but self-identify with a mainstream ideology – to do a little of both.

With this in mind, let us return to the history professor’s challenge. Scholars of religions may have convinced themselves that they have created “religion” in their studies and so are free to define it in any way they choose, but this way of thinking looks at the world with curiously blind eyes. At the same time, studying the discussions that the people we study have about religion and culture or *dharm* and *saṃskṛti* may not tell us very much about whether we as scholars want to label what they do “religion.” I do not have a horse in the *dharm* vs. *saṃskṛti* race. Technically I may count as a *numgra* and my personal sympathies may lie with them, but I am neither trying to assimilate into mainstream Indian society nor to remain separate – nor can I select one or the other option for reasons of social or political solidarity. As a

18 D. Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).