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The Arrogation of Being: Revisiting the Anthropology of Religion

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I wish to begin this essay by performing a Christian act. I wish to make a confession. After almost twenty years of meditating on the subject, I have come to the conclusion that religion is not a human universal. It never was. In this rapidly globalizing world it might someday become one, but it isn't one yet. I want to go even further and propose that religion is, by and large, a Christian affair (and possibly, to a lesser extent, an Islamic and Jewish affair) which has been, over the centuries, attributed by Christians to all the peoples of the world. It has been at best an act of courtesy and at worst an act of innocent arrogance. Given the way global power relations have worked over the past thousand years, the "conquered" in their turn have clamored to prove that they too, not just the conquerors, have "religion." With massive help from Orientalists, Indologists, scholars of comparative religion, and anthropologists, the West and the Westernized have come to hold the belief that, despite evidence to the contrary, all the peoples of the world have religion. I can instantly see a number of my friends jumping to their feet to demand of me my definition of religion. How could I possibly say that something is not universal without defining what that something is? My answer, my friends, is this: defining religion is your problem, not mine. But I can point you to the graveyard filled with the bones of a multitude of past definitions of *religion* and assure you that sooner or later yours, too, will end up there, with or without my effort. A tediously magnificent study of the fate of those definitions and theories that assumed religion's universality is the recent book by S. N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness*. The pioneering work on the universality of religion with a definitional focus was the much-debated book of Cantwell Smith. But definition is

not my primary concern in this essay. Balagangadhara's own study, though not definitional in focus, is an extended argument on the place of religion and its constituting regnancy in "Western culture." And the argument is logico-philosophical in nature. I wish to trace the gradients of power in the growth of religion and its consequences for those societies and cultures in which religion was an awkward foreign implant but with far-reaching consequences for the host cultures and societies.

What is most illuminating in the work of some of those students from the West who have struggled with the question of the universality of religion can be found in those moments of candor that flash somewhere early on in their inquiry when they declare, with different degrees of despair but with undeniable clarity of insight, that the culture or people they are studying do not have religion. Unfortunately, very few stop there but instead lose that clarity as they try to expand their definition of religion to capture more and more of the uncapturable in a cloud of definitional smoke. The "other" is transformed into "another" of the same. And, it is assumed, since the *same* has religion, so must the *other*. But this *another* ends up being only a highly qualified and equivocated version of the prototype, a mere reflection of the "original" on troubled waters. And where is this prototype to be found? Balagangadhara locates it in Christianity, a prototype to which Islam and Judaism may measure up, but certainly none of the so-called religions of Asia, Africa, or the Amerindians do. He argues that what is common to all three Semitic religions is the centrality they accord to "belief" in their self-definition. I am not as familiar with Islam or Judaism, but I am familiar enough with Christianity to know that a non-believing Christian would be an oxymoron of the first order. The converse is best illustrated by an example. Just before my father was to marry my mother, and willing to become a Christian for the love of her, he had an appointment with the missionary who was to facilitate the transformation. The first question the missionary asked him was: "Do you believe in Shiva?" As long as my father lived, he recalled this as being one of the strangest questions anyone ever asked of him. He acknowledged Shiva. He knew stories about him. But believe? That was a strange concept indeed to apply to Shiva! He lived among the manifestations of Shiva. My father lived the rest of his life as a Christian; possibly coming to "believe" in Jesus; but Shiva or Vishnu or Rama was not someone to believe in. That is not how an Indian relates to these powerful beings.

I wish to ponder the question of religion and belief further by considering their place in two traditions: in what has come to be called Hinduism and Buddhism. I have not forgotten the "global moment" which we have been charged to reflect upon. Let me do so via a detour through anthropologyland in the specific cases of Hinduism and the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

I. "Hindu" "Ritual"

Addressing Hinduism first and staking my claim as an ethnographer, allow me to introduce you to two ethnographic events. Both, to distinctly different degrees, partook of three ontological modes. These three modes I shall term mood, moment, and mind—a triad on which I have elaborated elsewhere and I will but summarily touch upon here in order to facilitate a better understanding of the role and place of belief in Christianity, a religion if ever there was one.[1]

The two events I have in mind are weddings. If pressed, I may even concede that they were "Hindu" weddings, making sure to remind you that I place "Hindu" between quotes. The first took place in 1974 in a village in South India. It belonged to a type of wedding that I was to witness and study more than fifty times over the following two years, in villages, cities, and towns all over South India. This (type of) wedding was traditional and local. The second occurred in a chateau nouveau in New Jersey in 1999. It was religionish and global. (I know, "religionish" is a fishy word, hardly English. My point, exactly.) There were many things common to both weddings. Both had rituals performed before a fire in which the officiating Brahmin, the bride and groom, and one or more of the couple's relatives participated; during both rituals the Brahmin recited appropriate mantras from Sanskrit texts; and both weddings were such that the men were strong, the women good looking, and the children above average. Correction! In the 1974 wedding, children were ubiquitous, everywhere and in place. In the 1999 wedding, children were few in number, in their places but out of place. Common, of course, to both weddings was the presence of the same anthropologist (same, except in the second, twenty-five years older and arguably a little wiser, but certainly far less earnest).

The differences between the two weddings were as many as were the similarities. That one was a Tamil wedding and the other a Punjabi wedding is not of much import. It is germane, however, that during the Punjabi wedding in 1999, the priest and several members of the

audience reminded us that this was a wedding in the Hindu *religious* tradition. Whereas in 1974 either no one thought to mention such a fact or else it was not a wedding in the Hindu *religious* tradition after all. In fact, the fifty-odd weddings I had attended between 1974 and 1976 in South India were identified by Tamils as Brahmin, Vellalah, Gaunda, Parayar, or by numerous other *jati* (or "caste") names, and also as either Christian or Muslim—as if these too were *jatis*. But never was a wedding I attended identified as Hindu. Let me add parenthetically, however, that only Christian weddings were marked by the fact that they took place in a "house of worship" called a church. The Christians saw the church as a sacred place and distinguished it from the place where the wedding feast would be held. The latter was a non-sacred place. The feasts at the Tamil weddings were 100 percent vegetarian, with no alcohol. The New Jersey wedding offered choices: Veg, non-Veg and, yes, Sushi—and that was only for "snacks." A multi-course dinner banquet was to follow with dancing and alcohol from the finest wineries, distilleries, and breweries from all corners of the globe. But again, this is a difference of little significance, because the food at both weddings, though very different, was delicious. What was significant is that the wedding feast at the New Jersey event was not considered part of the wedding ritual or, as the mother of the bridegroom put it, "It was not part of the sacred ritual; it was for all to enjoy." Was this non-sacred part *secular*, post-figuring a Durkheimian dichotomy? Was the sacred part not to be "enjoyed"—whatever that meant—by *all*? The division reminded me of the Christian wedding in a church with the feast that follows being held in a space that is not the church, in contrast to the many non-Christian weddings of South India. It is not pertinent to my essay that the Sanskrit accent of the Brahmin at the Punjabi was as dysphonic as the Tamil Brahmin's was euphonic; but it is germane that at the New Jersey wedding, the ritual specialist paused at various points during the rituals and the recitations to provide an exegesis of what he was saying and doing. In New Jersey, the guests sat on chairs arranged in neat rows, almost congregation-like, and paid keen, even if at times, bemused attention to what the officiant was saying. Had the priest in Tamil Nadu launched into an exegetical exercise it would have either gone completely unnoticed or, more than likely, the guests would have taken the priest to be slightly deranged. At the wedding in New Jersey, the priest wanted the recitations and the rituals to *mean* something and the members of the audience expected them to mean something; at the weddings in South India, priest and partici-

pants considered the recitations and the rituals significant but meaningless. If you press me to hazard a characterization of these rituals, I would have to call them, in all retrospective honesty, mindless. This is because meaning, in the dominant Western epistemologies, has been and remains a mental phenomenon. At least in my discipline, the structuralists, the post-structuralists, the symbolic anthropologists, and even the materialists would agree on this, even though they may disagree as to which is more important, mind or matter.

During my first year of anthropological fieldwork in 1974, my anthropologist-wife, our two research assistants, and I recorded, by all available means, every possible detail of the ritual performed by the officiating Brahmin. Our eyes and ears were focused, our pens and notebooks alert and active, our cameras alive and clicking. Our aim was to miss nothing. Except for the technology of photo taking, we were more akin to worshippers at a prayer meeting of early Puritans than we could have imagined possible for two self-professed atheists or agnostics posing as scientists. There were no explicit sermons, but (and possibly because of that) we regarded ritual as a cryptic sermon, ready to pour forth with meaning if we could only make ourselves fit to receive it, to understand that which was concealed in symbolic representations. We would, later, with the help of ritual specialists, scholars of Hinduism, textualists, and our own training in symbolic anthropology, decode words and deeds and find *meaning* therein. Ritual, for us, was, in Evans-Pritchard's words, "meanings imprisoned in action."[2] Setting these meanings free was our task, our calling.

What is more, ritual actions, including ritual utterances—Durkheim had taught us—were at the core of religion. The "elementary forms of the religious life" were to be found in ritual. Beliefs may overtly or covertly accompany these rituals but beliefs often hid what was at the core, concealed what religion was really about. Durkheim never doubted for a moment that ritual was anything but religion. He did take beliefs (that is, native beliefs) into consideration, but on the whole favored the view that beliefs got in the way of true understanding. Belief was for Durkheim a matter of art and material for the artist; it was ritual that constituted the object of scientific inquiry. It was not that what the natives believed was unimportant or even dispensable, but it was something that had to be sifted through so as to arrive at the real meaning that reposed in the more foundational beliefs imprisoned in ritual action which were to be brought to light only by the analyst. Rituals had to be studied and analyzed for what they represented. Rit-

ual actions were fundamentally and importantly symbolic. Had Durkheim, then, broken free of a belief-centered understanding of religion and arrived at a more fundamental, elementary or universal understanding and definition of religion? Hardly. There remained a belief that vied for center stage. This was the belief (or belief system) of the student of social science. (I include students of religion in the category of the social sciences; you may call it the human sciences, if you prefer.) But the difference was that the belief of the social scientist would be called theory.

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

> Anyone who contrasts the *City of God* with the *Summa Contra* cannot but be struck by the different attitudes exhibited by these two great minds of the Catholic Church with respect to "other religions." In the pages of Augustine, the "religions" of the Greeks and the Romans are constantly present. His polemics are directed against the "survivals" of the Graeco-Roman cults and associations. They are living presences, constantly reminding Christianity of an *otherness*, irrespective of what St. Augustine called them and how the church looked at them. By contrast, in a work written against the gentiles, Aquinas' tone is abstract and distant, which has less to do with his rational approach than with the subject matter.[3]

In his history of the Christian doctrine, Pelikan notes the situation as follows:

> The *Summa against the Gentiles* of Thomas Aquinas was written at a time when there were certainly very few "Gentiles," that is, pagans, left in Western Europe and when those for whom it was ostensibly composed *could not have understood it.*[4]

This observation, while true, masks a very important question: How could Aquinas himself have understood what paganism was? This (mis)understanding through the distancing of the *Other* has continued

in Western scholarship to this very day. Even anthropologists who go to "the field" never get there because they take home with them.

The Reformation marks the greatest refueling station — with fuel and food of theretofore unrealized potency—for the onward march of belief and believers alike. Indeed, it was there and then that belief was securely enthroned. Max Weber's opus, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is a testament to this achievement, and so are his other works on comparative religion, with all their insights as well as their blind spots. Protestantism provides its believers with a way of seeing the world. With the Enlightenment, a new religion in the image of its prototype was born. This religion was called secularism, its reigning deity, Reason. It, too, provided a way of seeing the world, a theory, and an epistemology. Seeing, which ought to be but one way of being in the world, becomes the supreme, if not the only, way of being in the world. Theoretical knowledge insinuates itself as that form of knowledge that will make the cosmos explanatorily intelligible. The question, "do you believe in Jesus?" can be advanced without encountering an awkward heartbeat, into, "do you believe in science?"

My mentor, Victor Turner, was an anthropologist trained in the Durkheimian tradition. If from Durkheim he learned the power of *conscience collectif*, he also learned from him the persuasive power of *representation collectif*. He was a Catholic turned Marxist turned Catholic again. Even though Turner (far more than Durkheim) was receptive to native exegesis of ritual and did not rush through it as Durkheim had done to arrive at *conscience collectif*, one wonders if he could have ever forgotten a lesson he learned from Marx — the lesson that consciousness could at times be false (and conversely, also true) and that if representations *represent* then they are also capable of *misrepresenting*. After all, these representations were symbols, or "signs of convention." And if conventions reveal, they also conceal. Neither Turner nor his students would have been so boorish as to consider native exegeses misrepresentations or false — after all, they were post-Gadamerian hermeneuticians—but we were trained to elevate our own theoretical representations to a level that could only be called more general or "higher." With the increasing distancing of fields such as anthropology from the conceits of the overt claims of the natural sciences, such theories may not have been christened "scientific," but they were seen as the end product of analytic reasoning. And thus, even though the Gadamerian assertion that "every point of view (that of science included) is only a point of view" was loudly professed, there was no

getting rid of the whisper of the Diltheyan envy of and hope for a standard in the human sciences that could some day stand up to the claims of the natural sciences. Science claimed that scientific theory made the world explanatorily intelligible. And so did Christianity, which in one of its most moving evangelical hymns, *Amazing Grace*, proclaims a believer's experience in the words: "I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind but now I see."

The very image evoked by the notion of a higher level of analysis privileges the optic. Why would one want to rise to a higher level except to be able to have a wider perspective, a better view? Theory itself has its roots in the Greek: *thea*, which means "to see." And what is more, one always theorizes "about" something. "Aboutness" is basic to theory. And "aboutness" is also basic to religion, especially Christianity. The scientist and the Christian have this one thing in common. They are committed to a form of knowledge that has to do with "knowing about." And right representations are what we need if we are to get *right* that which we are trying to know about. Others' representations—in the form of beliefs or exegeses—of what they are about are certainly invaluable, especially for ardent students of comparative religion and anthropology. For some, like Freud and Marx, they are invaluable because they promise to help reveal the false and the illusory. For others, such as Durkheim and Weber, they reveal something more real than that which these representations claim to be about, such as the nature of society or the power of ideology or the workings of history. But even in the absence of expressed native beliefs or exegeses, ritual actions themselves are taken as representations of something other than themselves; they are taken to mean something. How they mean and what they mean is what the scientist is after. Religion is an exercise in aboutness. So is theory in science. And to those who see ritual to constitute the core of religion it must also be an exercise in aboutness, an exercise in providing the believer a way of seeing the world, the cosmos. If properly theorized, rituals, too, will make the world (about which they are) explanatorily intelligible. My argument is that this is a very Christian and, ergo, a religious notion of ritual.

In the New Jersey wedding, the priest was a theorist. He was interpreting his actions, recitations and incantations in order to provide himself and his audience a way of seeing the world. He was performing a Hindu wedding—Hindu, as in Hindu religion. There was some awkwardness. He had not found his stride yet, which was cause for some levity among the members of the audience. And he knew it, too,

and straddled the divide between exegesis and clowning and kept losing his balance. But he was almost there. The HinduISM hadn't found its stride either. But it, too, was almost there. It was at the brink of arriving at the global moment, the religious moment, the Christian moment.

If I keep repeating the word "moment," I do so intentionally; partly with a nod to the title of this symposium which speaks of the "Global Moment," and partly with a relationship of contrast which "moment" holds to the two other elements in a triad I have already alluded to: "mood" and "mind." I treat this triad as a species of the philosopher Charles S. Peirce's phenomenological categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.[5] The word "mood" connotes a state of feeling, possibly vague and diffuse, but relatively enduring. It is a disposition toward the world at any particular time yet with a timeless quality to it. In the South Indian weddings, mood was of utmost importance, a mood that was created not by the light of exegeses (or what I would like to call theoretical knowledge) but by a state of being that was determined by an array of practices. It was only towards the end of my second year in the field that I realized that what was happening in a Tamil wedding was not only what was going on around the *homa kundam* or fire-pit, near the Brahmins with their rituals and recitations, and the drummers and oboe players with their music. Matters of equal if not greater significance were taking place in acts of getting reacquainted, making alliances, looking for prospective brides and grooms for sons and daughters, gossiping, rehearsing old prejudices and trying out new ones, testing each other's skills and poise, status and grace, taking measure of each other's place in an evolving order of things, transgressing maps of old privileges with stories of new ones. But do all these activities have anything to do with the marriage ritual as such? What a Christian question! It was all these activities taken together that created the appropriate mood of the wedding that dwarfed the moment and left very little place for mind.

At the New Jersey wedding, I did compulsively what all ethnographers do: eavesdrop, observe, note a point, follow a drift and then question those who were willing to talk, or even those not so willing to talk. I took the opportunity to speak with several individuals who had either come to the United States for the sole purpose of attending this wedding or with those who were well acquainted with weddings (their own and others') that they had attended in India. With hardly any prodding, they offered their opinions and feelings about the differ-

ences, none critical. None of the Indians, even those who were most likely to know, found fault with the ritual, except to comment on the novelty of the hermeneutic and exegetical exercises in which the priest indulged. They were keen observers of a host of other differences, but these differences seemed to amount to creating a different kind of mood than what they might have recognized in India. One remark in particular stood out for me; this came from a woman in her seventies. After noting that there were far fewer helpers in America (meaning "ritual participants") causing what the priest was doing to appear as if it was being done for the first time rather than an ancient rite that has been done thousands of times before, she observed: "This is like a school. Everything has a meaning. Very orderly. Lot of explaining." I asked her if the explanations were correct. She responded with a hand gesture and eye movement indicating something between "it doesn't matter" to "who cares!" to "who knows?" Overall, if I were to sum up the responses, at least with respect to the ritual aspect of the wedding, the mood would be characterized as uncertain and unsettled, even if not unsettling. This is what made this wedding a "momentous" one, a synecdoche of the "global moment."

With respect to "mind," I must begin with the only critical commentator on the scene, an American woman, a professor of Indian languages, who drove those around her to distraction by compulsively commenting on everything in the ritual that was "wrong:" the translation was wrong, the sequence of rites was wrong, the organizing of space was wrong, it wasn't the way her Pandit had explained it to her, *ad irritatum*. She was an insufferable repository of theoretical knowledge, religious to the core, reminding me of the anthropologist I was twenty-five years ago. Even without the professor there was a surfeit of mind in New Jersey. By *mind* I include the impulse to reason and to generalize — to theorize. The feasting and dancing half of the wedding was seen as distinct and separate from the ritual half, the solemnizing half. And what was the reaction to the solemn half? Many of the young Indians thought it was a *learning* experience. No surprise in that. The priest was hell-bent on teaching, preaching, and making the ritual practices explanatorily intelligible as if the lives of the couple and the young members of the audience — Indian American and non-Indian American — depended on it. They were both equally concerned with representations and their meanings. As one group of youngsters, all Wall Street success stories, told me: "The symbolism was neat" and "It is great to know what all this means." An American friend chimed in,

"It is great to know other belief systems." "We are getting to know our parents' belief system," echoed another in the group. Everyone agreed.

If one considers learning as the way an organism makes its environment habitable, then in this mind-dominated mode of learning, the cultivation of a way of *seeing* the world becomes the dominant way of making one's environment habitable, the dominant way of being in the world.[6] "Knowing about" becomes the only way to know.[7] The approach of the anthropologist, the student of comparative religion, and the Orientalist, is reenacted in such global moments. It is assumed that to know a people or a culture is to know about their "beliefs." It is based on a theological assumption that all human actions are expressions of beliefs; to know cultures is to have knowledge about the beliefs of these cultures. Through one's belief one acquires a worldview. Again, *nota bene* the optic in worldview. The root model for this way of being in the world is—even in its incarnation as science—religion.[8]

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that there is no learning involved in the weddings I witnessed in South India, but the manner of making one's way in the world, of making one's environment habitable, wasn't dominated by "learning about." Learning through being-in-the-world, learning ontologically, entails more than a way of seeing the world, or learning epistemically. It is not that representations were not involved in the total context of the 1974 Tamil wedding, but that the individual was not a mere observer, one who looked at and, if adequately educated, looked through representations — be they icons, indexes, or symbols—as if they were mirrors that would reflect a further reality. For every participant himself or herself was a representation, a sign. "Man [sic] is a symbol," Peirce wrote.[9] What one has here, then, is not a cogito or an agent in a world of representations or signs, decoding, interpreting, and explaining them, but rather, men and women who are themselves signs and therefore immersed in a semeiotic ontology, a semeiotic being-in-the-world. In such a world, what is important is not how well one makes mental representations of what is "really going on," but rather how one as a sign among signs finds one's niche, one's place, one's angle of repose or the direction of flow. And this calls for more than a theoretical knowledge of what signs in ritual mean or even what the world is. It is even more than knowing what ritual signs do. It entails knowing one's place among signs, ritual signs included. This entails more than knowing the world through seeing the world; it calls for knowing the world through a more compre-

hensive being-in-the-world, which the very notion of religion can only partially accommodate.

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

> is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[10]

Talal Asad revisited this essay a few years ago and has subjected it to a brilliant critique pointing out, among other things, that: "It is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power.… It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth."[11]

Quite apart from the denial of the dimensions of power by a symbolic understanding of religion, I wish to draw attention to the curious fact that Geertz's definition of religion could serve as well for a definition of culture. Correspondingly, were we to consider Durkheim's definition of the sacred, it would coincide with his definition of society. These coincidences are not accidental. For both in Christianity and in Western culture as a whole, the symbolic dominates. Symbols stand for something else; symbols are about something other than themselves. The better the symbols, the truer their representations. Christianity has always been about the truth in representations and, conversely, about false representations. Hindus, in their multitude of practices, are not concerned with truth in this representational form. The same goes for Buddhists, Jains, Shintoists, Taoists, or for that matter, for what goes under the label of Native American "religions." If the symbolic dominates religion and Western culture as a whole, it has also rendered performatives as symbolic, and wrongly interprets cultures where the performative is the norm by using "alien," meaning-laden symbolic standards. Thus, for Durkheim and most anthropological analysts, ritual is a symbol. In India, the symbol itself may be

experienced as a performative, thus transforming the symbol into a ritual. Ritual refers not to the performance of acts that instantiate practical knowledge, but to the performance of recursive acts. Balagangadhara observes that, "the social environment created in such a culture will itself be recursive, exhibiting the properties of recursive systems."[12] In recursive systems, the mood matters more than the moment. In non-recursive systems, it is the moment that matters and those who are in such a system must perforce be mindful of the moment. The New Jersey wedding was such a moment of mindfulness in which the mood was oxymoronically uncertain.

II. "Buddhist" "Belief"

Now, let me shift from India and Hindu New Jersey to Sri Lanka and Buddhism. If the making of Hinduism has been a long drawn — and still unfinished — affair, the making of Buddhism happened quite swiftly, within a span of seventy years. The best book to date on the making of Buddhism is Phillip Almond's, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. For an ethnographic understanding of the persistence of the unique formation of Sinhala Buddhism—with its split into textual and popular forms, great and little traditions—David Scott's brilliant book is indispensable reading. This split is both a colonial product and an anthropological object.

The great Indian historian Romila Thapar holds that the constructions of Buddhism and Hinduism are no older than 200 years.[13] According to Almond, Buddhism is a nineteenth-century religion. It was first discovered as a religion "out there" in the Orient as part of the heathen *Other*. But it was rediscovered in the Orientalist present as a theorizable object, which was located in the West. This relocation came about:

> through the progressive collection, translation, and the publication of its textual *past*. Buddhism, by 1860, had come to exist, not in the Orient, but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West, in its texts and manuscripts, at the desks of the Western savants who interpreted it. By the middle of the century, the Buddhism that existed 'out there' was beginning to be judged by a West that *alone* knew what Buddhism was, is, and ought to be. The essence of Buddhism came to be seen as expressed not 'out there' in the Orient, but in the West through the West's control of Buddhism's own textual past.[14]

Even more specifically, David Scott argues that "the conception of Buddhism as one 'religion' (*buddhagama*) among other 'religions' (*agamas*) — distinctive yet related to them in being identifiable as of the same genre of discourse — does not appear to predate the British missionary encounter with the Sinhalas."[15] Furthermore, the West had discovered not one Buddhism, but two: philosophical Buddhism and popular Buddhism. This is a distinction that has lasted to this very day.

Buddhism, as practiced in the East, "compared unfavorably with its ideal textual exemplifications contained in the libraries, universities, colonial offices, and missionary societies of the West."[16] Popular Buddhism was portrayed as a betrayal of Asia's Martin Luther, Gautama Buddha, who had attempted to dislodge "the superstitions and rituals with which the Brahman priesthood had enshrouded India, [and take] religion back to its simple and pure origins." This was a view to which Max Muller had given broad currency.[17] In the dichotomized form of Sri Lankan religion, textual Buddhism measured up to being a true (or truer) religion because it could be understood "in terms of 'doctrine' (supposedly 'what the Buddha taught'). [I]t was only natural that [true] Buddhists were taken by Western observers to be those who could be said to 'believe' in . . . the propositions of that doctrine."[18] Those who fell short of this call to believe were degraded to "animism," another, lesser form of religion.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhism congeals into a religion in the nineteenth century as part of a wave of "reform movements" that swept over South Asia. In India, Ram Mohan Roy (1772 – 1833) founded the Brahmo Samaj, Dayananda Sarasvati (1824 – 1883) founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, and Narendranath Datta (1863 – 1902), better known as Vivekananda, founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897. In Sri Lanka, the leading reformer was Anagarika Dharmapala (1864 – 1933). Strict etymology notwithstanding, "Reformation," used in a religious context, does not carry the connotation of something being formed anew or even an improvement on the existing state of affairs. Rather, ever since Luther, "reformation" has implied returning to a better original. In fact, however, the so-called reformation movements in India and Sri Lanka were reactive responses to the challenge of Christianity. Much that was formed in the nineteenth century in Buddhism and Hinduism[19] was not so much a renewal or restoration but the making of something that was totally new — even though the Sri Lankan Bud-

dhist reformer emphasized the point that his movement was not so much a reform movement as a renaissance.

These South Asian reformers were baited, as it were, into accepting a challenge thrown out by the Christian missionaries, a challenge to play a very serious game. This game was called "religion." In Sri Lanka, one of the forms in which this game played itself out was through public debates. These debates had been staged since the mid-1840s. As might be expected, initially the South Asians faced a stacked deck. The rules of the game were Christian. The game itself was Christian. And in general, the missionaries had used their debating skills to overwhelm some diffident and not very erudite representatives of the indigenous traditions.[20] The verbal confrontations, purportedly intended to critically examine the tenets of Buddhism and Christianity, would end up demonstrating to the audience gathered for the occasion the superiority of Christianity. By the 1860s, the balance shifted. By all accounts, the Buddhists were beginning to gain the upper hand in debate. In a series of five debates between 1865 and 1873, a very erudite monk by the name of Migettuvatte Gunanada established himself as the "terror of the missionaries." The Christians may have well lost the debate but they founded another religion called Buddhism, no longer a radical *Other* but another of the same, a religious rival, a member of the club of religions. In fact, the West had founded two religions: philosophical Buddhism and folk Buddhism—a distinction that paralleled the one made for Hinduism between textual tradition and popular Hinduism. It is a distinction that lasts to this very day. On the part of the Sri Lankan Buddhist reformers, they, too, no longer confronted a radical *Other* whom they could treat with indifference, but a religious rival. To quote the young Indo-American man at the New Jersey Hindu wedding, they came to know another "belief system," they came to know "what all this means." Some might have even found that "the symbolism was neat."

Anagarika Dharmapala was as complex as he was brilliant. His brand of renaissance Buddhism heralded many changes the effects of which—some good, some bad, some intended, some not—are with us to this day. In general, he sowed the wind and we reap the whirlwind. The nationalism which was born with the Buddhist reformation helped Sri Lanka throw out the colonizer but also helped usher in Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and its ugly antidote, Tamil Tigerism. One particular change that Anagarika Dharmapala brought about concerns a Buddhist institution called the *dharmadesana*.

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

1. The arrival of the preacher
2. Giving merit for the *dharmasana*, first time
3. The invitation to preach, in *gatha* and *prasa* (verses)
4. Giving merit for the *dharmasana*, second time
5. Invitation to the gods
6. Verses of *namaskara*
7. *Prasa* on benefits of hearing *bana*, lullabically
8. Benefits of *bana*, second time, in a different literary mode
9. The *sutra*
10. *Commentary*
11. *Maitrivarnana*
12. Giving of merit
13. Giving to the preacher

Seneviratne continues:

> A look at this sequence makes it clear that the doctrinal content is limited to the core of the *sutra* and the commentary. Even there the *sutra* is not understood, because it is in Pali. Even the commentary may well be in another text, Pali or Sinhala, which is also memorized by the preacher and chanted. The appeal of this was more poetic or musical within an overall stricture of religious emotion. It is possible that some preachers improvised and got across to the more educated or more intellectually inclined listeners some of the doctrinal content. But for the majority the sound was the message, the act of hearing itself being understood as generative of merit. This is brought out by the emphasis made in the quoted passage to the importance of the voice, its melodic quality, and the lullabic element.… There is the idea of performance.[21]

Now Seneviratne himself is an anthropologist at the University of Virginia, trained in the great tradition of Marx and Durkheim, and who adores Weber and idolizes the Protestant Ethic. As I continue to cite him you will see that his own biases lie with the "essence of religion," in the reasonable, which is to be found in the textual tradition understood by the reflective few, not among "ordinary people" and "folk" practices.

> The author uses the term *pavatvanava* to mean delivery of the sermon, a term suggestive more of a performance than an exposition of doctrinal concepts. What we see here is the kind of elementary rendering of the religion into aesthetic performance which was encouraged and did achieve its fullest development in Hinduism (music and dance), but discouraged by the Theravada orthodoxy. The evolution of dramatic forms was more successful in the folk healing rituals where the orthodoxy had no say. For ordinary people however this ceremonialism, and not any abstruse doctrines, constituted the essence of religion.[22]

> This new *dharmadesana* was a radical departure from the traditional. It was confined to about one hour, a remarkable shrinkage into one twelfth of its original duration. Next, it was free of the elaborate ritualism that conferred on the traditional *dharmadesana* most of its length. It was not a performance in the same sense as the traditional one was, and lacked the dramatic elements we noted in it. Above all it focused on a theme, a feature structurally integrated to the sermon in the form of a Pali verse that the preacher chanted explicitly recognizing it as the theme (*matrka*). While there are some precedents for this in the mediaeval Sinhala literary works which were essentially *dharmadesana* in written form, the new *dharmadesana* in its succinctness and unity resembled more the sermon that emanated from the Christian pulpit, like the ones which the young Dharmapala heard over and over again at the corrugated metal roofed hall in Keyser Street.[23]

III. Kataragama: A *Moment*ous Shift from Mood to Mind

There is a place called Kataragama in the south of Sri Lanka. Its reigning deity was Skanda, one of the sons of Shiva. When I was a child I visited the temple of Skanda. It was a place for ritual, possession, passion, and trance. Mood was everything. The body was involved in worship: it was pierced, it swung from hooks, and it bore heavy burdens called *kavadi*. There were no sermons. There was no one to tell you what it was all about. The devotees were Sinhalas and Tamils.

There were no Hindus to be contrasted with Buddhists. Even though it was a quarter of a century after Anagarika Dharmapala's death, it was a time when Hindus worshipped the Buddha and Buddhists worshipped deities of the Hindu pantheon. I was the only observer. I was an eleven-year-old Christian voyeur. I had accompanied some of my non-Christian Sinhala and Tamil school friends. I had come secretly, without my parent's permission, to watch the heathens go into ecstasy.

Since the outbreak of the Sinhala-Tamil civil war in 1983, Buddhist Sinhalas have begun to claim the shrine as Buddhist (meaning, not Tamil/Hindu). A certain "sanitization" of Kataragama has begun. Sinhalese and Tamil pilgrims realize that something momentous is happening. The nation has entered Kataragama and so has religion. When I visited Kataragama again in 1994, I noticed that the mood of the place was changing. It had become mindful of nation and mindful of religion. It had also become mindful of symbol. I picked up a booklet, written for the English-speaking tourist, which began a symbolic explanation of certain rituals with the words: "In the Buddhist and Hindu worldview . . . " I strongly suspect that the anonymous author had had some anthropological training. Religion and worldview produce a specific kind of knowledge, viz., theoretical knowledge. And Balagangadhara is right when he observes that "the necessity and indispensability of world views is the secularized version of a theological belief."[24] Anthropologists who look for a people's or a culture's worldview in order to tell it apart from another people's or culture's worldview, are merely religionists in another guise. Does one need a worldview to find one's way in the world? Does one need a religion? The pilgrims at Kataragama did not seem to think so—at least not in 1968. Times have changed. On the day of my visit in 1994, there were signs of a storm in the sky. But the real concern in my group of pilgrims was of a different kind of storm, the eye of which was religious nationalism. It was a time for suicide bombers and true believers, and it seemed like something momentous could happen without warning. The moment, though on a far more ominous note, seemed as uncertain as the moment that was, in New Jersey, called a "Hindu" wedding. The word was out that one must at least have a point of view if not a worldview. The question is: must all other ways of being in the world sooner or later be arrogated by the blind spot of religion? This, I believe, is the question for this global moment.

Notes

1. E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence* (1996), Chapter 4.

2. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937), 81.

3. S. N. Balagangadhara, *'The Heathen in His Blindness…:' Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (1994), 56.

4. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 – 600)*, Vol. I (1971), 39.

5. For the reader who persists in wanting to know more, a good introduction to Peirce's categories may be found in Carl R. Hausman (1993), 9 – 14. You may also read C. S. Peirce, 1.23 – 26. (In keeping with convention in citing from *The Collected Works of Charles Sander Peirce*, the number to the left of the decimal point indicates the volume and to the right indicates paragraph.)

6. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between *being* and *seeing*, see Daniel, 43–71.

7. See Balagangadhara, 447 – 50, for a discussion of knowing as "knowing about." "Knowing about" corresponds to the "epistemic" or "seeing" in contradistinction to the "ontic" or "being" in my usage, for which, see Daniel, 43–71.

8. Balagangadhara, 451.

9. C. S. Peirce, 7.583.

10. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), 90.

11. Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (1993), 35.

12. Balagangadhara, 465.

13. Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities?," *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 209–230 (from page 38 in Seneviratne).

Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988), 12–13.

David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on Sinhala Yaktovil* (1994), 187–188.

16. Almond, 37.

17. Christopher Clausen, "Victorian Buddhism and the Origin of Comparative Religion," *Religion* 5, no. 1 (1975): 7.

18. Scott, 188.

19. David Scott holds that the genealogies of the Buddhist and Hindu "religions" are somewhat different. Buddhism, he argues, owes much of its formative moments to the impact of Victorian Evangelicalism, and Hinduism carries with it the formative aura of Orientalism.

20. K. M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (1981), 340.

21. H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings* (2000), 74–76.

22. Ibid., 76.

23. Ibid., 80–81.

24. Balagangadhara, 429.

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