



BRILL

NUMEN 61 (2014) 1–3

NUMEN

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## Introduction

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The following three articles are results of a common research program called the “Comparative Science of Cultures” (originally “*Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap*” in Dutch), which was developed by S. N. Balagangadhara at Ghent University, Belgium (see Balagangadhara 1994, 2012). Even though the articles focus on very different themes — the religious-secular distinction, the belief in the cultural universality of religion, and Gandhi’s writings on conversion and religion — they throw light on several aspects of this research program.

One of the basic concerns of the Comparative Science of Cultures is the current state of the social sciences and humanities: these appear to describe a Western cultural experience. The descriptions that we work with, the terms these “sciences” use, and the theories that are built reflect how the West has experienced itself and other cultures. This goes both for the Western study of non-Western cultures and for social theorizing in general. After all, the study of non-Western cultures developed in continuous interaction with the growth of the social sciences and humanities. Theorists approached the descriptions provided by early writers (such as the Orientalists) as though these were facts in need of explanation. For instance, Orientalists provided descriptions of “Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” and the social structures of Asian societies; these were then taken-up by other thinkers like Max Weber and Karl Marx in order to explain why capitalism had not developed in Asia, or by Montesquieu and Karl Wittfogel to account for “Oriental despotism.” Subsequently, such theories were used to conceptualize Asian cultures and societies further.

Naturally, the particular cultural experience that the West has had of itself and others is neither universal nor neutral. Like all experiences, it is a limited experience: it is structured and constrained by a background of prior attitudes and modes of thinking. As a result, the conceptual apparatus produced by today’s social sciences and humanities also operates within specific cultural constraints.

An important constraint in this conceptual apparatus is the transformation of all other cultures into variants of Western culture. Put more accurately,

others are reduced to variations of the West's conception of itself: all cultures have their "own" religions; these also consist of sets of metaphysical beliefs; their practices are expressions of such beliefs; their ethics revolve around norms and values; a set of laws constitute the foundation of societies and political authorities, among other things, which sustain such a legal and political system. In other words, cultures are not only structured in the same way, but they are also different from each other in the same way. While there is variety to the content of their beliefs, practices, norms, and laws, what remains invariant is the formal structure of such societies.

The dominant frameworks in the contemporary study of religion and culture were shaped by the secularization of Christianity. Secularization here does not entail that these frameworks freed themselves from their religious moorings, but that they are products of a Christian religion that is reproduced in a "de-Christianized" form. That is, Christian religious structures spread across Western societies in the form of commonplaces. This is not to suggest that there is a one-to-one relationship between theological ideas and their secular translations. Rather, recurring patterns or tropes from Christian theologies are transformed into the "topoi" of Western culture. These topoi (singular "topos") have a number of properties. They are not isolated ideas but consist of larger clusters of related ideas. They also consist of specific kinds of commonplace ideas, namely those that become conceptual resources for developing theories and hypotheses (De Roover, et al. 2011:578–581). They can be formulated in several ways, using different terminology to express the same topos. Such topoi constitute the basic building blocks of current theorizing about religion, and they also structure the descriptions that Western culture has given of itself and other cultures.

This suggestion has several consequences, some of which are examined in the following three articles. A first major consequence is that some self-evident "facts" in today's reasoning about religion actually reproduce the Christian-theological beliefs of yesterday's debates. Jakob De Roover's essay examines how this is the case for the belief that religion is a cultural universal. For centuries, the potential existence of "nations" or "tribes" without religion constituted a crucial concern of Christian thinking about humanity, but the debate on this issue was eventually settled by transforming a theological assertion into an anthropological "fact."

A second closely related consequence is that central concepts in today's reasoning about religion travel with undeclared theological baggage: their basic significance and intelligibility rely on a series of other ideas and beliefs which are fundamentally theological in nature. Once detached from these surrounding beliefs and ideas, within which they were originally embedded, the relevant

ideas encounter unexpected problems. In his contribution, Balangadhara demonstrates how the much-discussed distinction between the “religious” and the “secular” faces such problems. Originally, this concerned a theological distinction internal to Christianity between the spheres of true religion, false religion (or idolatry), and the secular or religiously indifferent. That this triad was reduced to the so-called “religious-secular binary” keeps generating unsolvable problems in contemporary debates.

Third, if topoi are dependent upon larger frameworks or clusters of commonplace ideas (or other topoi), then this entails that they may not travel easily across certain cultural boundaries. After all, the commonplace ideas of one particular culture or society are not shared by all other cultures and societies. When topoi nevertheless migrate from one culture to another, they will be interpreted and understood using clusters of topoi present in that second culture. In her contribution, Sarah Claerhout shows that this can lead to a peculiar kind of conceptual distortion. Examining Gandhi’s writings on religion and conversion, she reveals how his distortive use of certain English-language terms and phrases indicates a deeper coherence in his thought, which reflects Indian commonplace ideas about traditions and change.

How can the social sciences and humanities move beyond the cultural constraints that currently limit their theorizing? This question points to the task of “decolonizing” the social sciences and humanities: there is a need for building alternative theories in different domains — including the study of religion — which should take into account the experience that non-Western cultures have of themselves and of the West. But the first step in this alternative theorizing is precisely that of showing how current theories and descriptions are constrained by a culture-specific conceptual language. It is on this theme that the following three articles focus.

### References

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