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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA AND  
THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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## Chapter 12

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### Africa on Our Minds

Russell T. McCutcheon

*Just an old sweet song  
Keeps Georgia on my mind*

—Stuart Gorrell and Hoagy Carmichael,  
“Georgia on My Mind”

The study of religion’s relationship to its colonial past offers a useful and complicated case study in how methodological self-consciousness actually impacts scholarship in the field of religious studies. And of all the sites from which one could draw to find ethnographic instances useful in pressing such issues, the continent of Africa—conceived either as an actual place or, far more interestingly, as a discursive space to which people can travel only in their imaginations—stands out. For, along with what was once called “New Holland” (or Australia) and “the New World” (or the Americas), “the dark continent” was a place to which our scholarly arm-chair predecessors imaginatively traveled as they poured over the diaries and reports of missionaries, traders, and soldiers in search of both their own evolutionary precursors as well as the origin of religion itself.

Lest we too quickly criticize our intellectual forefathers for their tendencies toward dehistoricized essentialism in their hunt for the source of the Nile, we should recognize that, even today, a variety of disembodied Africas remain the primary means by which peoples whose ancestors were forcibly spread across the world—from Brazil to the Caribbean to North America and Europe—look to find some speculative origins of their own. From the supposed ability of the pan-African colors of green, yellow, and red to represent an entire continent, to the tourist next to whom I once sat

on the long flight from Atlanta to Johannesburg (who was eager to find his ancestral past in modern day South Africa), different conceptions of Africa are traded daily, for a variety of purposes, on the international market of ideas and identities.

As we have learned from several generations of myth theorists, quests for origins—whether they concern the universe, a people, or even a scholarly discipline—are far more complicated than they might first appear. For the Africa to which my companion on that jet traveled in his mind's eye was many steps removed from some stable, natural fact. Leaving aside the complexities of recovering a thing called "the past," we can at least say that the Africa of the contemporary Afrikaner is not likely to be confused with the Africa of the Nigerian farmer, the Africa of diamond mine workers, the Africa of an Egyptian businessman, the Africa of a travel agent in New York, let alone the Africa of international aide workers in an office somewhere in Europe.

Precisely this point—that there is something important at stake in too quickly homogenizing these different Africas—was nicely made in a public lecture I attended not long ago, during which the speaker was careful to caution those in attendance from too easily talking about the continent as if it was a uniform whole. Despite its apparent continuity in geographic space, a dizzying array of differences in social space (e.g., nation-states, languages, ethnic groups, etc.) quickly confounds any attempt to discuss what a previous generation of Orientalists might have summed up as "the African mentality" or "the African mind."

But having been persuaded by this caution not to overlook matters of historical and empirical difference, I was therefore struck by how quickly the lecturer, who hailed from Africa though was trained in Europe and worked in North America, then set about to describe the key traits of this thing known as "the cosmos of African traditional religions" (e.g., ancestors, healing rituals, etc.). This was accomplished in a manner that would strike a European phenomenologist of religion from a generation or two ago as thoroughly familiar. What happened, I wondered, to the caution about the perils of homogenization? Is anything gained by studying a "cosmos" rather than a "mind?" Simply put, how did matters of empirical difference so quickly give way to such metaphysical uniformity?

Moreover, as one of our undergraduate seniors in the religious studies department asked during the question and answer session that followed the lecture, how was the lecturer able to use such colonial era terms as "myth," "ritual," and "religion"—terms that rose to prominence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe—to describe authentic patterns of living that, or so we were told, predated the colonial era? A sharp question, for it hinted at the problems associated with too quickly assuming our ability to do a

little dreamy time traveling, despite never leaving the lecture room in Alabama.

The answer that our student received amounted to being told that we had no choice but to use such Greek and Latin-based English terms because, were the lecturer to call these things by their local or indigenous names, well, none of us attending the lecture would understand what was being talked about. This was, however, a rather unsatisfying answer, for, much as with Shakespeare's Juliet asserting the self-evident nature of the rose's sweet smell regardless what it was called, a philosophically idealist presumption was apparent, suggesting that names are just arbitrary labels that we apply to stable realities already existing in the world. This is nothing but the old "you say 'to-mae-to'; I say 'to-mah-to'" view of classification; apparently, regardless what we call it, we all know what to put into a salad or onto a sandwich, not to mention what religion is and is not. This is, in fact, Mircea's Eliade's well-known (and often criticized) assertion that, whether you call it religion or not, and whether you know it or not, everyone is religious because it is, as he phrased it, a structure of human consciousness.

What struck me as particularly interesting was that this answer to the student's question seemed to satisfy many who were in attendance. Perhaps it is not surprising that people are quite comfortable assuming that their local words, concepts, and grids, are in a one-to-one correspondence with reality, presuming that—much like manufacturers who produce the same basic product for different distributors, each of whom use their own unique labels and packaging—only one map exists despite the different ways it is folded and used. However, I have a sense that those in attendance at this lecture would likely not have been persuaded if they had been told that there was this actual thing in existence known as *amandla* (a Zulu term) which we, in the English-speaking Euro-North American world, simplistically call "power." Unbeknownst to us, therefore, *amandla* is really what we are all talking about when we talk about power; what we are all manipulating and exchanging; that it derives from ancestors, healing, powerful figures in the sky, and so on; and, through careful historical study, we might be able to recover our indigenous, precolonial sense of *amandla*. Because of the difficulties imagining a taxon local to distant people being adopted here at home as a name for a self-evident aspect of reality, the ease with which the audience universalized their own local classifier (i.e., "religion") ought to strike scholars as curious.

So, instead of starting off with a self-flattering idealism that finds in each new social world's essence what we knew to be there before ever coming across it, perhaps a better way to begin to answer our student's question is to take a little more seriously the act of naming itself. For naming is

nothing more than the act (and please note: it is an *action* of specific people in specific locales) of establishing and regulating what some group sees to be relationships of significance. In so doing, we would highlight the sort of methodological self-consciousness referenced in my opening sentence.

Now, by methodological self-consciousness I have in mind something once written by Jonathan Z. Smith: "The student of religion," according to Smith, "must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study" (1982: xi). Why? Because, as he memorably stated on the opening page of the Introduction to his influential collection of essays, *Imagining Religion*—in the lines immediately preceding the above quoted admonition—"Religion is solely a creation of the scholar's study. . . . Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy."

Some have criticized Smith's famous lines for apparently missing the fact that people outside the ivory tower routinely talk about religion and act in ways that they themselves understand as religious—indicating to such critics that Smith has overlooked that scholars are not alone in thinking that they have some categorical prerogative when it comes to this term. But I think that such critics have missed Smith's point entirely. For in my reading of his work Smith argues that the term "religion" is used as a name for a universal, experiential trait which, owing to the fact of the varying historical and cultural sites of its public expression, comes in a relatively small number of more or less stable varieties (today known as "the world's religions"). If indeed this is the case, then we have little choice but to conclude that this modern concept "religion" was originally developed in that laboratory we call the early modern academy, during that time we once euphemistically knew by such names as "the Age of Discovery" and "the Enlightenment"; the concept was later honed during what we know simply as the colonial era. For this is when reports from abroad meant that Europeans were confronting human novelty of an order previously unknown. "Religion," for those busily reworking their society's epistemological and sociopolitical grids in light of the previously unforeseen and unknown, became a handy indicator of intangible likeness in the face of sometimes seemingly overwhelming empirical difference.

As such, we find from this era great scholarly debates about whether this or that practice was religious (think no further than, at the height of modernity, Emile Durkheim's efforts to distinguish religion from magic). "Religion," then, became shorthand for the degree to which "they" were or were not like "us." If they were like us, then the question was just how much we were alike (i.e., are they an early version of us, frozen in amber? Or are they a degraded form of us, thereby functioning as an early warning sign of what we might become?). If they were not like us, then a host

of other designators was at hand for naming the newly found alien peoples, along with some of their beliefs, behaviors, and institutions—apostasy, paganism, superstition, and magic—all come to mind as useful examples. (Today, we could easily add cult, fundamentalism, and extremism to this list.)

Religion, then, as a designator of a domain shared, to varying degrees, across cultures, that names a social space separable from other sorts of spaces (such as the political or the economic), is indeed a creation of the scholar's study; moreover, recognizing the double entendre of "study" in Smith's sentence (understood both as disciplined practice [i.e., method] as well as a room or an office) means that we who today study religion or religions, whether in our offices or out in the field, whether near or far, may not be all that removed from our predecessors seated in their comfortable armchairs. For—much like the ethnographer seated on the woven porch in the photo that graces Jim Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986)—we too have little choice but to use familiar, local, and thus comfortable imaginative constructs to chart that which strikes us as distant, unknown, unfamiliar, and thus uncomfortable. That the scholarly category "religion," used as an indicator of social affinity or distance, then takes off so successfully outside academia's hallowed halls—such that today, as identified by those who, in my opinion, use this observation to critique Smith, we cannot help but find it used worldwide as a preferred self-designator, such that many people have no difficulty identifying this or that as their religion in contradistinction to other seemingly stable and self-contained domains of their life—is therefore the thing that we ought to be studying. To rephrase: rather than studying the spread of religions, perhaps we ought to consider studying why naming part of their social world *as* religion has caught on so widely among diverse human communities.

All this is merely to say, rather inelegantly, what Smith said so plainly twenty-five years ago: self-consciousness about our use of categories ought to comprise a scholar's primary expertise, for the knowledge we gain from putting into practice the rule of our field is premised on the assumption that but one culture's folk category (i.e., the Latin-based term "religion") can be effortlessly elevated to the status of a cross-cultural universal, thereby naming an essential feature of all humankind. Of course, using the local *as if* it were universal, and doing so for *our* analytic purposes, to satisfy *our* own curiosities and *our* interests, is the inevitable situation in which we find ourselves inasmuch as we, as scholars, are situated human beings with no choice but to grapple with issues of familiarity and strangeness, similarity and difference, nearness and distance, etc. However, doing so because of our confidence in the universal reach of these purposes,

curiosities, and interests is best understood (at least to my way of thinking) as that form of ideology that goes by the name of imperialism.

To see some of this in action we should return to an example derived not from Africa—as if there is such a uniform place in the empirical world—but, instead, from the study of Africa (which is but one site of what we might as well just term the discourse on Africa). So consider, for example, David Chidester's book, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*—winner of the American Academy of Religion's book prize in 1997 (in the analytic-descriptive category). Rather than being simply an historical study of the ways in which others were classified and thereby managed by each successive wave of colonial administration, in the background of Chidester's book there is a rather harsh indictment of the European failure or outright refusal to, as he puts it in his opening, "recognize the existence of indigenous religions in southern Africa" (1996: xv). In other words, instead of seeing the classifier "religious"—no less than such other classifiers as superstitious and savage—as an historical tool once useful in creating a cognitively and socially habitable world, one whose varied uses came in handy for a dominant group's interest in ranking and managing diverse populations so as to create certain types of "civility," Chidester, too, employs the classic idealist set of assumptions regarding the universal presence of this thing some of us happen to know as religion. It is on the basis of this assumption that he indicts our predecessors for the "mistakes of the past" (Chidester 1996: 259). Furthermore, to avoid committing the sins of our intellectual fathers he advocates toppling the formerly canonical sense of what constitutes a religion, such that more things can now be entertained as religion (hence his support for polythetic, open-ended definitions, such as those commonly known as family resemblance definitions). The failure to recognize indigenous religions for what they really were and are, and instead seeing them either as savage precursors to, or degradations of, the normative European world, is therefore the basis of the present's judgment against the failures of the colonial past.

But recalling our interest in proceeding more self-consciously, we must ask, is this best understood as a *failure* on the part of our intellectual predecessors? Although for a host of reasons I wish not to reproduce their particular approach, using their specific tools (e.g., unilinear social evolutionary theory), must I conclude that they are culpable for generating knowledge by means of a classification system removed from their object of study? If so, then by what standard are they culpable? Have we, their latter-day judges, finally arrived at the end of history, such that we now know what things really are and how they really ought to be studied? In fact, being far more timid in my confidence with the current classifications that we use, I think that a different book would *not* have portrayed the

eventual discovery that "they" indeed had religions just like "us" to have been a triumph but would have seen this judgment instead as evidence of the tremendous victory of the European map of the world! That is to say, there may be no better evidence of the success of a hegemonic power than what we find in those who—like the lecturer of whom I spoke earlier—deploy the colonialist's terminology in a postcolonialist effort to recover the pre-colonial heart of authentic Africa. For finding authentic religions out there may constitute sufficient evidence that there's nothing particularly "post" about our postcolonial world.

As suggested, a different study—one working to be self-conscious of the historical nature of the concepts by means of which we, like our predecessors, inevitably create knowledge about the world—would have problematized this now taken-for-granted classificatory development (i.e., "religion") and examined, for instance, the last century's preoccupation with cultivating a type of politically and theologically liberal interreligious dialogue in step with the interests of liberal democracy and market-driven capitalism (i.e., what are the relationships between the invention of private property and the invention of discourses on private religious experience?). This could have been accomplished by mapping the use of the classifier "religion" onto the long history of management techniques used to ensure a specific sort of identity and social organization among potentially competing and conflicting identities—whether in modern Europe (where difference of belief and opinion helped to establish the uniformity of behavior and organization) or its many peripheries. Only then would we be serious about engaging the history of our field and its relations to a colonial past, for we would cease treating our term "religion" as a natural kind; instead, we would be open to scrutinizing the sociopolitical worlds that it helped, and still helps, to make possible and persuasive.

Keeping in mind the overly confident presumption of earlier scholars to have transcended their own cultural boundaries—much like science fiction movies about either the past or the future that cannot help but look like the time in which they were made—the use of "religion" to single out essential, transhuman traits therefore constitutes evidence of the failure of scholars to be self-conscious about how it is that they go about their own work. For when we are told about such a thing as the precontact sacred African cosmos, such scholars fail to recognize that their presumption that this long past world quite naturally had a religious heritage that is somehow distinguishable from the messy world of insidious politics is itself a historically specific management technique, projected backward in time, and whose use outside its original domain in the European world is evidence of its tremendous utility. In fact, that people the world over now routinely understand themselves to have an active, inner religious life that

is distinguishable from their outer political activities is evidence, to me, of the success of the dominant systems that such scholars think they are overcoming by spinning nostalgic tales of the past.

The invention and perfection of the distinction between religion and politics was useful in creating a specific type of order in the European world several centuries ago. It relates, of course, to such other useful distinctions as belief/practice, intention/interpretation, experience/expression, myth/ritual, and, finally, private/public. But this seems to be of no relevance to us today; instead, like many before us, we not only self-impose but also export these distinctions to distant shores and distant times, as if all groups naturally understand themselves in just this manner, and as if all groups know what does, and what does not, count as the real significance beneath the changeable appearances. Much like the current young generation's inability to imagine a world in which there are no microwaves, no CD players, and no Internet, scholars who imagine religion to be lurking around every cultural corner cannot imagine "religion" to be our historical invention, able to satisfy our intellectual (and political) interests.

While I am not trying to suggest that, like a golden egg resting comfortably beneath a fairytale goose, some authentic, indigenous self-understanding awaits the careful conservator who has cleaned all the surfaces of some exotic artifact of its accumulated residue, I am suggesting that recognizing that all we have are discourses by means of which banal stuff become such things as artifacts, will help to dispel the rush to culpability and the search for complete understanding that drives so much of our work as scholars in our post-colonial world. In place of this quest for the authentic heart of Africa (or of India; or of pre-Christian Europe; or of Native American spirituality; etc.), I suggest that we become a little more self-conscious about what it is we do when we do this thing we call scholarship. Such an adjustment in our practices will help us to retool our field as the cross-cultural study of contesting classification systems and the differing identities and social worlds made possible by the simulation of permanence that human beings often find nowhere but in their mind's eye, lurking somewhere in our peaceful dreams. For, if we are really interested in the relations between intellect and power, as evidenced in the ongoing interplay of colonialism with the study of religion, then we must be prepared to

reveal and examine the prejudices of previous generations as unsentimentally as future generations are likely to reveal and examine the prejudices that we, in our supposedly greater wisdom, labor under. (Mishra 2003: 36)

## Note

Portions of this chapter are drawn from McCutcheon (2003a and 2003b). My thanks to the editor for his very helpful comments.

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