

Religion in 50 Words

A Critical Vocabulary

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-69045-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-69047-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-14018-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003140184

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

31 Origin

Why would the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, go to the city of Ayodha, in northeast India—long held to have been the birthplace of Rama (along with Krishna and various others, said to be an avatar, or incarnation, of the great god Vishnu)—as he did in August of 2020, to give a speech on the ruins of a sixteenth-century mosque that had been destroyed in Hindu nationalist riots back in 1992? Well, not just to give a speech but to engage in a series of public Hindu rituals orchestrated around a groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a new temple on the site, proclaiming, as part of his speech: “The wait of centuries is coming to an end.” With the COVID-19 virus ravaging India’s people and its economy at the time, the event’s references to what many there would no doubt describe as the nation’s glorious Hindu past provides for us an initial example of the powerful nature of discourses on origins. In this case we witness what some there claim to be the origins of the Indian nation—a nation-state thoroughly modern, of course, but which, on occasions such as this, makes strategic use of a discourse on a lost—but apparently now regained—golden past. As reported in the *New York Times* on August 5, 2020, “Mr. Modi’s Ayodhya ceremony was a captivating distraction. It symbolized Mr. Modi’s ‘total domination over India,’ said Arati Jerath, a political commentator.” Tales of origins, far from an idle narration of where something came from, are thus socially formative devices that therefore require more from the critical scholar than just their repetition and paraphrasing.

The word “etiology” (also spelled aetiology, from the ancient Greek *aitia* for cause) was once used as a technical term to name a family of tales that narrate the origin of something. A prime example is a cosmogony, i.e., a myth on the origins of “order” (from the ancient Greek *kósmos*), a story that tells how the system of order that we call the cosmos came into being. Yet, there is an ambiguity between the modern English terms “cause” and “origin,” which suggests a semantic range that, once again, might prompt

confusion if used uncritically in scholarship. While some ways of talking about causes (e.g., temperatures of 100°C or 212°F *cause* water to boil) are historically situated, empirical, and therefore at home in the university classroom, there are yet other ways of talking about origins that are imagined to pre-date history (e.g., “In the beginning . . .” that opens the Bible’s Book of Genesis) and therefore removed from all forms of evidence, suggesting that the two discourses need to be distinguished. Generally, in the study of religion, origins tales refer to the latter type of narratives, usually classified by scholars as myths and mostly told by members of groups when situating themselves in their world. However, the manner in which narratives of origins are sometimes treated by scholars as if they have historical veracity is troubling and in need of closer attention.

Based on the ancient Latin *origō* for source or beginning, the modern word “origin” continues to imply ancestry or lineage and thus even the provenance and legitimacy of something. Entering from French, we see the term used in English from roughly the fourteenth century onward, along with the adjective “original,” the later noun, “origination,” as well as the related adjective and noun “aboriginal” (for those people or things considered to have existed somewhere from the earliest times). The term is often used with regard to the place or time from which something is said to have first arisen or been created. In this latter sense, it occasionally coincides, as noted, with the word “cause,” which names either the source or the reason and thus motivation for something to be or to be the way that it is. Consider the title of the book by the Reformation-era German Anabaptist, Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528): *Reason and Cause why Every Man who was Christened in Infancy is Under Obligation to be Baptized According to the Ordinances of Christ, Even Though He be One Hundred Years Old* (1527). The assumption is that to identify a source is also to identify the reason for something’s existence, as may be seen in the title of the book by the dissenting English minister, Israel Worsley (1768–1836): *An Enquiry Into the Origin of Christmasday: Shewing that this and the Other Festivals of the Christian Church are Continuations of the Heathen Feasts of Antiquity. Together with Remarks on the Celebrated Number Three, which Has Been Made Sacred by Pagan Superstition* (1820). Throughout the nineteenth century “origin” gains considerable prominence, especially in scholarship and notably for those influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theory to account for the perceived changes in entire species—or in the case of some, groups of people—over time. Thus, we have the title of Charles Darwin’s (1809–1882) own influential book, *On The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection Or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Implicit in the title is that if we can identify something’s origin, we can then somehow understand its *raison d’être*.

Applied to the study of religion, notably in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term is most often associated with early theories of religion's cause. This is associated with a variety of naturalistic and therefore explanatory theories of religion that sought to trace religion's origins to an error in reasoning among early human beings. We see this, for example, in E. B. Tylor's theory of animism (a term for belief in spiritual beings), as argued in his then influential book *Primitive Culture* (1871), or in the British anthropologist, R. R. Marett (1866–1943) and his subsequent theory of mana (a term adapted from Melanesia to denote a primal and pre-animistic sense of power), as elaborated in his entry in James Hastings's once well-known *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1915, vol. 8, 375–380). By the first decades of the twentieth century, such attempts to trace the origins of religion, with little or no prehistoric evidence, were tantamount to speculation. While it might result in a gripping story, such theories increasingly were of dubious scholarly value since there was no way either to confirm or disconfirm such assertions.

The early twentieth century instead saw a move toward functionalist approaches, which were more concerned with studying religion's observable social, political, psychological, economic purpose or role. This meant moving away from studying prehistoric time to conducting fieldwork among contemporary groups. Despite the shift, scholarship continued to be shaped by an interest in ahistorical origins—something argued persuasively by Tomoko Masuzawa in her book, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (1993) as well as her entry “Origin” in the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000), not to mention Willi Braun's critique of scholarship on Christian origins, e.g., his essay collection *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion* (2020). Despite the increasing focus on fieldwork with contemporary groups by means of the participant-observer method, scholars would still fall into the temptation of drawing untestable conclusions on the distant and even prehistoric past based on inferences from their current observations. It took quite some time for scholars to realize that people living elsewhere in the world did *not* correspond to a living artifact of humanity's supposedly common evolutionary past. Thus, nineteenth-century references to our historical predecessors as being the supposed “childhood of the species” found their counterpart in later references to “the primitives.” For instance, consider the French Catholic, Alexander Le Roy (1854–1938), and his *The Religion of the Primitives* (a book based on his long career as a missionary in Africa, beginning in 1877), where, representative of his time, we read that “[t]he primitives that our theories deal with are barely disengaged from animality” (1922, 284). We also see this in the much later *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 1 Prolegomena and Prehistory*, from as recently as 1970, where we

find unproblematized, descriptive claims made about “primitive ways of life,” “primitive man,” “primitive languages,” and “primitive occupation.” There also exists an entire chapter, the third, devoted to “Primitive Man in Egypt, Western Asia, and Europe,” which is concerned with the earliest record of human habitation in these regions. While this latter may well lack the overt chauvinism of Le Roy’s earlier book, it nonetheless participates in now rather troublesome assumptions about the presumably universal or inherent qualities of early human populations, in distinction from what was usually just referred to as “modern man.”

What might be apparent by now is that origins tales can be understood in two rather different ways, only one of which strikes us as critical. The first understands them as narratives that are exclusively concerned with saying something factual about their object, such as a tale concerning how the nation was founded. The second, in contrast, understands them as narratives that use some object, such as the nation’s past, as an opportunity to authorize the speaker’s own position. Since the time of origins is lost to historical research, then claims about it cannot be studied with an eye toward how accurate they are or are not. Even more recent historical events, such as founding the nation or how one’s grandparents came to move from there to here, have many possible causes, all somehow working in concert with one another. However, there also exist many possible viewpoints such that each one inevitably selects items from the archive of the empirically knowable past by subsequently connecting those items into a narrative that makes sense to, and suits the interests of, the contemporary speaker. Recognizing this complexity suggests to us that origins discourses are not actually concerned with their purported topic—how some past thing came into being—but instead seek to legitimize or benefit the position of the one who is telling or hearing the tale. This shift in how we study origins tales takes seriously recent work in historiography, which argues that claims about the past implicate the historian far more than previously recognized. In our own field, we see this approach in those like Jonathan Z. Smith, who argued that, for example, the thing that scholars today designate as “the archaic” is actually something devised in the modern era, to satisfy contemporary curiosities (see his essay, “Scriptures and Histories” in *MTR* 4/1 [1992]: 100). Returning to narratives of national origins, it is not difficult to find dramatically different tales within the same nation-state, each drawing upon different items from the archive of a nation’s past. This archive contains dramatically different events and actors, often held together in tension with one another, some of which are authorized by the nation’s leadership while others are dear to marginalized subgroups within. The tales that result sometimes explicitly conflict with one another, given that they are in the service of contesting

positions in the present, despite both supposedly narrating the story of how the same group arose.

Because origins tales can be neither confirmed nor rejected, they are particularly convenient for entrenching a wide variety of contemporary interests *as if* they were each eternal, obvious, and justified. For this reason, we need to be careful in how we treat such accounts in our work. Even the supposed simple task of describing a group's narrative of its own past risks uncritically reproducing and thereby legitimizing it. While this tendency might be obvious when used to describe the tales of groups that are widely seen to be controversial, it is often more difficult to detect when descriptive scholarship passively recounts an origins narrative shared by the members of groups seen to be uncontroversial. Consider scholars of Christian origins who wish to study the ancient social world from which what we today call early Christianity arose. They are understandably suspicious of the common story told by Christians, which involves a fairly linear narrative concerning Jesus's birth, teachings, and eventual crucifixion followed by the ardent work of disciples. Such a narrative, however, strikes critical scholars as being the refined product of later writers, back-projected in time, in an effort to suit later purposes and self-understandings of what it meant to be a Christian. Oftentimes, these purposes and self-understandings may be radically different from those who are later considered to be the tradition's founders. That we could cite yet other examples should be obvious, especially those tales contained in each chapter of a world religions textbook, often differing very little from the story told by the group's own members.

To gain some more precision we can cite the distinction between origins and beginnings, as offered by the literary critic Edward W. Said (1935–2003), in his collection of essays, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1985). While origin claims imply for him a passive origination, as if something springs forth out of nothing (e.g., the old Latin doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, as applied to God creating the world from nothing), Said argues that claims made about something's beginning presupposes the agency or at least effect of a precursor of some sort, as in A was the beginning of B—which was itself the effect of yet another prior cause, and so on. This distinction implies that beginnings, as well as claims made about a beginning, take place in a world of historical cause/effect relationships, a world of choice, contest, and consequence, rather than what Said characterized as the privileged world of origins. This is a helpful distinction for those wishing to study the past but in a way that avoids the authorized voice of the origins tale. As the historian of religions, Bruce Lincoln puts it, the historical voice constitutes “that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on

rigorous critical practice” which he distinguishes “in the sharpest possible contrast” from the discourse of our object of study, what we term religion, “whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal” (see the second thesis in his “Theses on Method,” *M TSR* 8: 225).

Simply put, discourses on origins is what Braun has characterized as “a prominent (and troublesome) point of preoccupation, even devotion” for scholars, given “the possibility that origins are retrospective constructions” (*Jesus and Addition to Origins* [2020], 69). Discourses on what he calls absolute beginnings therefore should constitute data for the critical scholar of religion. They can be studied as rhetorical techniques, always of socially formative effect should they be heard or read as persuasive and legitimate. Rather than being understood as benign references to some bygone or distant era, we can instead analyze them as techniques that are invariably situated in the present of the speaker or the writer, who uses the narrative’s supposedly timeless object as an opportunity to shape a particular representation of a past that will be understood to lead irresistibly to a present, all of which supports a specific set of interests and choices that shape our possible futures.

In this volume see: classification, description, explanation, function, history, method, power, theory, world religions

In *Religion in 50 More Words* see: creation/endtimes, emic/etic, founder, hagiography, nones, paganism, sacrifice, theology, tradition