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Elsewhere: seeking alternatives to European understandings of “religion”

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ABSTRACT

Problems in defining and studying religion are well known to us. What we might identify as a specific European legacy, now exported globally, could be more radically challenged by concerted efforts to respond to alternatives more positively and more robustly. This article identifies some problems for the study of religions: not only an inherited definition that privatises religion as “belief” but also a theological legacy that encourages scholarly ambitions to divine objectivity. In setting out alternatives, I propose that starting “elsewhere” will be helpful. Studies of material, performative, vernacular and lived religion establish some rich possibilities. A reconsideration of Maori *tapu*/taboo protocols may demonstrate the value of re-theorising “religion” beginning “elsewhere” than the still normative refrain of “belief and practice” encourages. In order to more radically indicate the problems of dominant scholarly approaches (rather than solely definitional issues) I say a little about “witchery” in South Africa and the difficulties of knowing how to respond as a scholar of religion. My argument is that we must change our approaches because we have changed our definitions.

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In this article based on my keynote lecture for the EASR 2013 conference, I seek to contribute to debates about religion and scholarship. Problems in defining and studying religion are well known to us. What we might identify as a specific European legacy, now exported globally, could be more radically challenged by concerted efforts to respond to alternatives more positively and more robustly. In setting out what I think the problem is (namely a European Christian Reformation, Nation State-serving definition of religion), my task is made easier by its familiarity. In setting out alternatives, I propose that starting “elsewhere” will be helpful. In part this strategy too is made easier because some of the alternatives to “religion as private belief” are already somewhat familiar to us both from exemplary studies of material, performative, vernacular and lived religion, and from challenges to the “world religions paradigm”. I make use of selected alternatives, especially the “elsewhere” of Maori *tapu*/taboo related practices. However, the problem I seek to face is not only with the definitions we employ to demarcate our field of study. Our scholarly practice as researchers and teachers is also significantly affected by the ideologies and processes legitimated in the same early-modern era that enshrined the priority of “believe” in definitions of religion. Thus, the same familiarity with possible alternatives makes our task more challenging because it is evident that the weight of our own scholarly tradition and of our modern(ist) context forcefully and/or subtly tends to

reinforce the definitions, approaches and foci of attention which we challenge. This is evident in monographs and discourses about religious material cultures which continue to treat “things” as representations or solidifications of “beliefs” or ideas. Words like “symbol” and “symbolism” sometimes (but not always) reveal the veiled presence of the standard approach. If too many textbooks and too many conference papers seem trapped by the gravitational pull of “believing”, the fantasy of scholarly objectivity and/or disengagement (originating in a theology of divine transcendence) is similarly maintained. A discussion of witchery in South Africa illustrates my struggle to find a scholarly way to engage with violent religion.

Easing into the task

I have sometimes set undergraduate students the task of presenting ideas about where they would take visiting space aliens who ask to be shown “religion”. I ask them to imagine such unlikely beings saying, “We have been observing Earth and have seen what you call sports, politics, catering, tourism and botany, but we want to observe the thing you call religion. What can you show us?” Once they get the idea, students are usually good at this. At first some need help in getting past the idea that religion cannot be seen because it is defined as “belief in god”. Since most of my British students suppose that belief is a private or interior process, and that god is transcendent and/or immaterial, they assume that neither are actually observable. Only the derivative *expressions* of belief (e.g. in ritual, art or text) or inadequate *representations* of divinity (e.g. in “idolatry”) are considered observable. With effort and humour, my students and I find that we can do better than this. We start thinking about what people do and we boldly determine to focus on religion as an everyday activity. Sometimes we get creative: we wonder if the visiting aliens might use their senses differently from us, and need to hear or smell religion. The competitive sonic environment of multi-cultural, multi-religious cities (such as Jerusalem or Leicester) or the olfactory overload of places where animals are sacrificed or incenses are wafted serve as prompts to this thought-experiment. Once we imagine that the aliens really know *nothing* about religion, we discuss whether they might think that flower arranging or tea drinking are the most significant religious activities of Christian church-goers. Sometimes there is laughter when this is suggested, but we quickly realise that it is far from obvious why everyday matters like flower arranging and tea drinking are not standard items for research about religions. We commonly conclude that our textbooks are faulty if they do not engage with the full sensuousness of religious lives both in dramatic moments and in quotidian spans.

More is at stake here than trying to follow the lead of pioneering colleagues who have encouraged the examination of vernacular, lived, performed and material religion rather than transcendent abstractions (e.g. Primiano 1995; Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008; Vásquez 2011). Nonetheless, we do need clarity about what data we should seek when we wish to understand “vernacular” or “lived” religion because these terms have been misused. We need to understand the horizons, if any exist, within which we pursue understandings of religion. But a related matter presents itself as soon as I contemplate horizons. That is the more difficult question of what position and/or posture enables us to perceive whatever happens between “here” and those horizons? While a revolution is taking place in which religion is being defined in relation to everyday life and putatively mundane matters, a shift in understanding our scholarly performances has not been pursued with sufficient vigour. This is why my purpose in this article is to engage with two entwined issues: definitions of “religion” and approaches to studying religion. My argument is that we must change our approaches because we have changed our definitions.

Recognising that not all of us have in fact recognised the obsolescence of the “world religions paradigm” or of the definition of religion as “belief in spirits”, I will summarise

what I think is a pervasive agreement about these. I can do this briefly because I cannot think of anything new to say about it. Nonetheless, I need to do it because I do not think we have been radical enough in rejecting the paradigm or the definition. (Perhaps I should say that I have no interest in debating with those who seek to defend the belief that believing *is* definitive or to promote it against the tide of opposition to the “world religions paradigm”.) Thus, I will argue while much of what these not-yet-entirely-decayed ideas invite us to assume about religion has been challenged, we remain burdened and distracted by their legacy in various ways. I can illustrate this here by pointing out that if religion is *not* definitively “belief in spirits”, many of our disciplinary obsessions with or polemics about, for example, objectivity, theology, insiders and outsiders look startlingly curious. In the next section of this article I will be reflecting on the legacy of the European Christian heritage of our dominant understandings of religion and its study.

For more positive propositions about defining and studying religion, I propose to go elsewhere. In order to find contrasts with the European legacy that can still lead us to associate religion with interiority and metaphysics, I follow the traces of relationality, performativity and materiality into the alternative data of (somewhat familiar) vernacular religioning. In my experiments “elsewhere” I have become increasingly convinced that the real barrier to understanding religious living is the legacy of a European notion of transcendence on our scholarly postures and practices. My primary concern, then, is not that we have wrongly defined *religion* as something concerned with transcendence and believing (though it is true that we have done so). More importantly, it is the *scholarly* conceit of attempting to transcend the real world of relatedness and participation that is most deeply damaging to studying religion and other facets of human and other-than-human life. In seeking to see religion happening in the elsewhere of embodiment, matter and relationships, I propose that we need to rethink our scholarly perspectives and performances. There is no single and unassailable way of doing this. I offer only some examples and some encouragement to trends that might help us match our best understandings of “religion” with better approaches to being scholars.

World Religions

I think I can assume that the “world religions” paradigm is well known and robustly challenged by most colleagues in the field of the academic study of religion(s). Publications such as those of Fitzgerald (2000) and Masuzawa (2005) are almost canonical here. Many podcast interviews on the Religious Studies Project expand on the theme importantly (RSP 2013).

Equally, I am fairly sure that many scholars of religion regularly problematise approaches to religion that treat scriptures, official creeds or founding statements as sufficient for the scholarly purpose of understanding, introducing or explaining religion(s). Nonetheless, for pragmatic reasons perhaps, many of our introductory modules and textbooks refer to the same range of six or seven religions and they frequently present a trajectory from founder (or early teacher at least) through text, scripture, teachings, institutions, historical development to leading or representative characters. Some introductions to religion or religions include brief discussion of “ordinary” people and their somewhat confused or syncretic knowledges of their “traditions”. This is all too easy to lampoon. It is, however, a disciplinary addiction we seem to find it hard to kick. Witness how (despite the protestations of Leonard Primiano and others) the phrases “vernacular religion” and “lived religion” still get used (like “popular” and “folk”) as if they refer to that which is not the proper, official teaching of a particular religion — understood once more as that official or textual core.

Some publishers too want books that fit those traditional courses that someone must still be teaching. There are, of course, exceptions, such as the “Religions in Focus” project that colleagues and I are pursuing (initiated by Harvey 2009). Here we follow what I think is best practice in the study of religions: we treat religions as the lived realities of those who associate themselves with those lifeways — or even with the names people use to identify religions. We discuss what people do. If the scholarly community worked harder, we could persuade more publishers that we do not need any more “world religions paradigm” textbooks. We do not need more books that treat the words, acts or ideals of founders and elites as definitive. In their place, we need more books that treat religions as continuously evolving performances and experiments that (potentially at least) touch all aspects of people’s lived realities. (This is not to assert that everyone does live religiously at every moment, but only that the regular claim that religions are often lifeways rather than interruptions into ordinary reality is important.)

The problem is somewhat larger, and it is not only ours. It is one that scholars of religion have adopted because of our broader context. This can be illustrated in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Article 18 we read that everyone has the freedom to believe whatever we want, and the freedom to manifest our beliefs. (The Declaration’s assumption that “everyone” is male is also problematic and, being anarchic, I have rejected its use of “his” in order to include us all.) I recognise that Articles 2 and 16 make religion similar to “distinctions” like “race, colour, sex, language, . . . , political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” and to matters like “nationality”. That is, these other articles give the impression that their framers knew that religion might be social or performative and not only individual or ideological. Nonetheless, the primary and habitual association of “religion” is with matters of belief. It is a kind of intellectual or cognitive practice. It is primarily something done “inside” individuals. It is taken to be a universal human freedom that cannot be legitimately constrained by political powers or other pressures. Indeed, it could be assumed that as a kind of “freedom of thought” religion cannot be practically constrained, except by brainwashing or other forms of coercion. At any rate, although the UN declares that this is “your world”, it does not describe the world of people who think religion *should* define rules about food, clothing, sexual and marital relationships, political and social structures and, in at least some cases, ecological activism or military action.

The fact that alleged *manifestation of beliefs* can be legally constrained while the believing itself is a sovereign act of private individuals reveals the genealogy of the idea. We have, in this declaration, not moved on from the privatisation of belief in the core texts of the documents that are thought to have resolved the early modern Wars of Religion (e.g. the Peace of Westphalia). Some might argue that we do not need to move on, that this historic definition of religion is entirely adequate, sufficient and even necessary. It is, after all, vital to modern notions of secularisation and citizenship in nation States. However, William Cavanaugh (1995) and Richard King (2007), among others, invite us to reconsider the “Wars of Religion” as wars of State-making. The invention and imposition of the notion and practice of nation States required a dramatic restriction of the domain of religion. Transnational relationships and commitments could not be allowed to distract citizens from their obligations to the princes and bureaucrats of the new world order. Here we see, among other things, the seeds of the polemic in which violence committed for religious reasons is “fundamentalism” or “extremism” — both because violence can only be legitimate when conducted by or for the State but also because religion must now be a private matter of “believing”. It is this truncated notion of religion that has dominated subsequent thinking, legislation, conflicts and media-speak. As Bruno Latour (2010) and many others have argued, the assumption that others “believe” while we (heirs of

early modern European rationalism) “know” makes it harder rather than easier to understand “other cultures”. But equally, “believing in belief” (as Latour says) makes it hard to understand ourselves and “our culture”, including our academic culture.

There is, I know, far more that could or should be said here. I realise that the brevity of this presentation may suggest that a genetic fallacy (“religion was defined for modernity in a specific period and is therefore bad or inadequate”) is being reified. However, I intend only to highlight what others have admirably demonstrated about the invention of States and the faulty theory that religion is about private beliefs and non-rational believing. I also honour the fact that other colleagues have said important things about the mutation of the European notion of religion-as-belief, and the privileging of the world religions paradigm globally, for example in the invention of Protestant style Buddhist movements, in the elevation of “high gods” in various places, and in the acrobatic efforts to categorise religions as “ethical” or “ethnic”, “institutional” or “folk”, “major” or “mixed”, and so on. My point is that this definition serves political purposes well (for nation States) but misdirects the attention of scholars interested in lived religion (whether it is lived by citizens of such States or by other classes of person).

What interests me now is experimenting with approaches to religion that move us further onwards. So I propose to leave behind the “believer” and the “man in his solitude” spiritually confronted by “the numinous” or “the sacred”. I propose to stop thinking that religion is sufficiently defined as being about postulating non-empirical nonsense. I turn, instead, to seeking to understand what people do when they do religion.

Doing Religion

In *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life* (2013) I experiment with a range of phenomena which might enhance recent and new developments in thinking about religion. I draw on my fieldwork research among particular indigenous, Jewish and Pagan people, but also from less structured observation and some careful reading about other religious lives, including those of some Christians and some Pastafarians. Part of the way into writing the book I was somewhat surprised to realise that I was revisiting terms — like taboo, mana, totemism, fetishism, syncretism, purity and enchantment — that have been part of the technical apparatus of studies of religions and cultures since the nineteenth century, if not earlier. Bringing these into conversation with recent studies of lived religion and especially with Manuel Vásquez’s (2011) proposal of a more vigorously materialist theory of religion seemed to me to justify the relational focus and approaches of colleagues interested in the “new animism”. One example is the proposal of Ken Morrison (1992, 2013) not only of a “non-supernaturalist” theory of religion but also of a “post-Cartesian” anthropology of religion (in turn citing the influence of Irving Hallowell, 1960). All of this is important but can only serve as background in this article.

Instead of expounding or developing those ideas, I have selected one issue considered in *Food, Sex and Strangers* that illustrates some of the ways in which “elsewhere” cultural assumptions and performances might enhance our understanding of religion. I follow this with some thoughts about an issue that is only lightly touched on in the book but deserves further serious, sustained and swift attention. The first of these issues is taboo, the second is witchery. Both have to do with boundaries, exclusions, separations and, in various ways and to various degrees, violence.

Taboo

The English language was enriched in the late eighteenth century by the adoption of the word “taboo” from Oceanic languages or dialects. In the diaries of Captain Cook’s 1768-79 voyages the term appears several times with the comment that it “has a comprehensive meaning” or “seemed to be a word of extensive operation” (Cook 1777: 3.1: 129, 157). Cook writes, for instance,

“When dinner was served, not one of them would even sit down, or eat a morsel of any thing, as they were all *taboo*, they said; which word, though it has a comprehensive meaning, generally signifies that a thing is prohibited” (Cook 1777: 3.1:129).

He also notes that his scientists were given a “potato field” adjoining a *morai* in which to erect their astronomical observatory. He notes that:

to prevent the intrusion of the natives, the place was consecrated by the priests, by placing their wands around the walls which inclosed [sic] it. This interdiction the natives call *taboo*, a term frequently used by the islanders and seemed to be a word of extensive operation. (Cook 1777: 3.1:157)

The OED evidences a fairly rapid adoption of the word for use in British contexts and much the same is almost certainly true of other European languages. You were probably well aware that “taboo” can mean “prohibition”, “consecration” or “interdiction” because the term is so familiar to us. A range of contexts, some more “serious” than others, illustrate the usefulness of the term. Just as a sign from Hawaii’s Waikiki Beach prefaces an injunction with the Native Hawaiian dialect version, “*Kapu*”, so common English signs that say “Do not walk on the grass” could perhaps be prefaced by the word “Taboo” without confusing anyone too much. In academic discourse about religion, too, we can apply the notion of “taboo” more widely than with reference to Polynesia. We can speak about areas of temples being taboo to particular types of people, or of particular behaviours being taboo in churches or mosques. Ethnographies of indigenous religions, in particular, are alert to taboo protocols and practices in many places. We could compare and contrast taboo systems with Kashrut and Halal. We could debate Freud. We could ponder whether the “burkini” illustrates taboos in Islamic costuming. Without hesitation we could apply and/or develop Mary Douglas’ classic work, *Purity and Danger* (1992). In various ways, then, the term “taboo” is a familiar component of our popular and critical vocabularies.

However, my point here is to twist our thinking so that we make the word work as hard for us as it does for native Polynesian speakers. I want to struggle with the statement that “sacred means set aside” so that this familiar assertion ceases to be quite so bland. I seek to recover the drama of the relational ebb and flow of words like taboo, sacred, holy and, indeed, religion.

Not for the first or last time, I will cite my favourite foundation for a definition of religion — that of the late Maori scholar, Te Pakaka Tawhai. Speaking of the traditional knowledge of his people, Ngati Uepohatu, he wrote: “The purpose of religious activity here is to ... do violence with impunity” (1988: 101). Part of the explanation of this phrase is that despite the seemingly global injunction against killing it is also required that good people shelter and accommodate their guests and therefore need to cut down trees to build houses. In Maori contexts it is also imperative to provide meeting places where locals and their visitors can debate issues of mutual concern. The trees and their relatives need to be given respect. This is all the more clear when you know that the tree which Tawhai is thinking of has

been holding the sky apart from the earth. The tree (any tree, but particularly venerable old trees in forests) is Tane Mahuta, child of Mother Earth and Father Sky, strong separator of the primal parents. If it makes it easier to think of this as poetry, myth or metaphor that's fine, but perhaps we are here confronted with another aspect of the legacy of Europe: the post-Reformation difficulty of saying "is" without suffering the interference of theological disputes about body and bread as symbols or representations. For now, I simply repeat the far from simple assertion that the tree *is* a separator.

Moving on, the cut-down tree cannot become a shelter for guests without the labour of carvers and builders. A preeminent construction of Maori culture is the carved meeting house, *whareniui* or *wharetipuna*, in which locals and visitors can face each other. (I acknowledge that some people see carved sea-going canoes as preeminent.) In the house, the carved tree takes on a new role: separating the roof from the floor. Just as Tane separated his parents in order to make room for other life to flourish, so the space between floor and roof allows life and lively-debate to flourish. In both cases, life means diversity. In the forest world there is diversity of species, relations and interests. In the meeting house there is diversity of opinion and need, all seeking resolution between hosts and guests. To have entered the house peacefully is to have negotiated the protocol-structured encounter of locals and those who were at first potential guests *and* potential enemies. Some possibilities collapse in the fertile laboratory of the *marae* space between entrance gate and meeting house. Locals and visitors re-create each other as hosts and guests by approaching each other, speaking together, breathing together. Then the talking and negotiating move inside the ancestor house — the participants being eaten into the house and birthed out with new relations, new possibilities, new futures. Carvings on the inside and outside of many carved houses make this utterly explicit. (I elaborate on these themes in Harvey 2003 and 2005.)

How does any of this help us understand how "taboo" contributes to rethinking what "religion" might look like? How does it do more than add some data about indigenous cultures and their interaction with imperial ones? The challenge is to grasp the fully relational context and content of taboo discourses and practices. It is perhaps too easy to fix taboo into the kind of dualities that structure so much of European thought and behaviour — e.g. holy and profane, religion and secular. Rudolf Otto and Richard Dawkins seem worlds apart, but they both indulge in reifying separations and mistake them for observable distinctions. But "taboo", "holy" and "sacred" are relational terms in their originating cultures. Something, someone or some state may be taboo or holy (or indeed, "unclean" or "impure") for a while, but may then become ordinary or, at least, accessible to a wider community. Maori meeting houses under construction may be tabooed to non-carvers (and there may be particular gender differentiations in play) but the taboo must be lifted and the entry opened widely for such houses to be more than admirable objects. Since inviting the admiration of art is not the purpose of traditional Maori carvers, taboo absolutely must cease if people are to approach, enter and use these meeting houses. In short, taboo is a phase in relationships not a permanent state.

Returning from "elsewhere", having struggled with Tawhai's "doing violence with impunity" and other Maori knowledges, we might more fruitfully contemplate the dynamic fluidity and relationality of seemingly familiar terms. When we grasp that taboo making, maintaining and lifting are these kinds of relational processes — negotiations to support socialising between different persons, places, objects or acts — then perhaps we will find that sacred and profane are not dualistically opposed terms and, more dramatically, neither are religion and secular. Perhaps they are not even things to lay alongside each other, or the flip side of one thing. Rather, they are

fluid phases of ever-changing relationships. Perhaps this would aid the thought that flower arranging deserves more research as a religious act. Perhaps we should take seriously the common religious claim that religion is an all day every day matter.

Without taking more time here I invite you to revisit “taboo” and see if this encourages you to rethink the category religion within the dynamics of social relations in a larger-than-human world. If Tawhai’s aphorism that the “purpose of religious activity is doing violence with impunity” is applicable more widely, it points us towards a definition of religion itself as some kind of inter-personal relational act or behaviour. In *Food, Sex and Strangers* (Harvey 2013) I propose that religion is the etiquette of inter-species relationships. Since it is relational, it requires us to attend to local specificities rather than to seek universally normative practices.

Furthermore, perhaps what is helpful to our scholarly task is the way in which, by both separating-and-linking people, places, acts and things, taboo protocols and procedures contest the bounded, boxed-in-ness of many representations of religion. If scholars of gender, ethnicity, age and class can study anything and everything, and do so without establishing a “pure form”, it seems unlikely that we should treat “religion” differently. Just as there is no opposite of those aspects of reality or of those categories of study (no “not gender”, “not age”, “not class”, but only different ways of organising whatever it is to which these terms refer), it seems unlikely and unhelpful to postulate something that is definitively “not religion”. Happily, of course, many scholars of religion have decided that if there is something called “not religion”, whatever that thing is can be studied by scholars of religions. There is, then, nothing that is “not for us to study”. There are, however, processes through which scholars of gender, politics, sport, religion, floristry and religion select aspects of the full ebb-and-flow of relational live (the only kind there is) with which to engage. The illusory boundary between “natural sciences” and “social sciences” is, in the end, only useful as a means of focusing on particular features of the inherently interconnected meshwork of reality. (Just in case this seems baffling, humans are “natural” and chimpanzees do culture but we need not dismantle our faculties if only we refuse to erect fantasy fences.)

Witchery

I am sure we are all quite tired of the promotion of “nice” religions and the demonization of “radical” ones. Our job probably ought to be about debating absolutely all manner of phenomena that present themselves as “religion” or that might be theorised as “religion”. To privilege “nice” religions is, perhaps, to acquiesce to the project of empowering States by demonising alternative social constructs or performances. Anyway, a number of potential cases or issues are available if we want to think about the not-so-nice or utterly life-threatening aspects of religion. These, I propose, may enrich our scholarly analysis of relational religion in lived reality. I turn here to trying to say something about witchery. This is a term I have learnt from Native American authors like Leslie Marmon Silko (1977) and use instead of “witchcraft” because the latter is, in Humpty Dumpty’s terms, overworked and underpaid (Carroll [1872] 1962: 274–5).

While in South Africa in 2013 for the start of an international collaborative research project on ritual and democracy, funded by the Norwegian Research Council, I was taken to visit a refuge for mentally handicapped children. Precisely and only because of their health conditions these children are threatened with being used as resources for “medicines”. Without protection in the refuge, the body parts of such children can be used to combat others’ problems or to empower their users. Even before arriving at the refuge to be protected against torture and murder, many of these children have been appallingly treated. Efforts to cure their mental or physical health problems,

sometimes perceived as possession or the anger of ancestors, have included having boiling water or ground glass forced down their throats. Others have been asphyxiated by hanging, causing further brain damage. Some have been raped by AIDS sufferers on the grounds that this might take away the disease.

Some of the violence involved is related to witchery complexes. That is, human body parts are said to be used by witches in their evil-doing, but they can also be used in efforts to protect potential victims from the work of witches. Whether or not to believe in witches, witchery or this form of medicine is not the issue here. This is not a rumour of suffering children. Neither is this a dying practice of a marginal primitive community who only need more rational education. Reports suggest an increase of similar acts in many parts of Africa and beyond. The perpetrators include members of Christian Churches as well as members of “traditional African religions”. (Objections that this is “not Christian” or “not traditional” need to be based in more than assertions of nice-ness.) Perpetrators include people who have made a success in the competitive economic world of late capitalism — indeed, to buy some medicines made from tortured or murdered children requires considerable sums of money. This is one more element of the complex cultural and economic hybridity of modernity.

A vast amount more needs to be said and done about this. I do not need to belabour that point. Despite the shock of seeing these damaged children, I am struggling to think about their situation within the constraints of academic studies of religion. The fact of their treatment is a bit of data that deserves inclusion in research and teaching about contemporary religions. I propose, however, that we need to do more than challenge the “real religion is nice” cliché or blandly accept that religious boundary contests often involve violence. To return to Tawhai’s provocative phrase “doing violence with impunity”, perhaps I need to clarify the point that he meant something different to “just say please and sorry”. A non-anthropocentric reading of Tawhai shows that impunity is only gained within respectful relationships. The “other” must be a willing co-participant. Witchery and the “medicine” of opposition to feared witchery do not involve mutuality and do not seek permission from the refuge children or other disabled children in the region. It is illustrative of the actively anti-relational behaviour expected of cannibals and other anti-social persons discussed in a different context by Morrison (2002).

Why take time here to tell you about this refuge, these children and this witchery and “medicine”? What does it have to do with the effort to think differently about religion? It most certainly grounds my thinking about lived religion within realism about violence. Rejecting the easy get-out that “this is not religion”, I seek to understand how witchery and medicine contribute to defining religion. Although it would be a salve to push the issue to someone else’s discipline rather than ours, the fact that the perpetrators and refuge guardians claim religious involvements makes this a religious issue. I refuse to retreat into the discourse of “belief” — not only because it hardly matters to the children if witches really exist, but more because its time we left “believing” out of our definitions of religion (except where believing is definitive of a specific religious activity). This may not be *solely* a religious issue but that’s true of all religious facts and all other relational facts. Religion is not a boxed thing, a discrete object or performance, a neat -ism. Religion — like sport, politics, catering, literature, gender, class, ethnicity and age — is our critical term, the lens with which we focus on the ever shifting realities around us.

Turning from the European, early modern political reification of “religion as individuals’ beliefs about matters that don’t matter politically”, witchery helps us to see another aspect of religion in a relational world. Relationships can be dangerous: people can seek power over others, domination rather than cooperation, greed rather

than sharing. People can fear and hate those they suspect of being greedy or selfish. They can also fear and hate those they perceive as being successful. Witchery, medicine and related complexes are religious aspects of these antipathies towards others. They are tragic examples of the drama of lived religion. They are also examples of activities that scholars of religion encounter in the course of research. No professional boundary can justify attempts not to respond. Indeed, “doing nothing” or “merely observing” is already a response. It is, in part, in struggling to understand appropriate ways in which we might respond as scholars that I find myself dissatisfied with only saying that witchery is part of the problem of defining religion. It is also part of the problem of defining scholarship.

Brief recap

So far I have outlined some common ideas about problems caused by the export of a specific understanding of religion into domains other than that of the needs of nation States. I have indicated enthusiasm for experimenting with data and approaches arising “elsewhere” than the belief-centred world-religions approach. I have outlined some ideas about taboo and witchery that seem to me to offer potentially rich resources for thinking again about familiar as well as alien perspectives and realities. In the final section of this presentation I outline something more serious than the problem of knowing what our data is. I argue that the burden of a European notion of transcendence continues to skew our performance of scholarship.

Real world academia

We live in a thoroughly relational world and a thoroughly participative universe. (This, too, is part of Manuel Vásquez’s important 2011 volume, *More than Belief*). Darwinian and quantum sciences are solid foundations for our understanding of our place in the evolving and intimately interactive scheme of things. You will be familiar with the phrase “there are turtles all the way down” (turtles standing in for consciousness) and some of you will have heard my phrase “there are hedgehogs all the way around” (hedgehogs standing in for all our co-evolving relations in the larger-than-human community or ecology). There is nothing contentious here, I think. My problem is that I think we remain mired in the confusions of pre-Darwinian, pre-scientific ideas about human exceptionalism. We continue to look for religion within people — not now in “souls” but in “mind”, “intellect”, “consciousness” or “cognition”. Until we fully and adequately engage with religion as lived by embodied, emplaced and participative persons, we keep the “world religions paradigm” alive as an approach.

There is more, however. In some of our incessant worries about colleagues who get too religious or about our students being too insiderly or theological, we sometimes assert notions of objectivity that are distinctly transcendental. Within a participative and interactive cosmos, as integral members of that cosmos, there is no position from which we can observe all things without some degree of participation. We cannot be like the transcendent and omniscient deity posited by some kinds of Christian theology. As Donna Haraway has said, we cannot do the god trick (1988: 582). There again, Latour says “we’ve never been modern” (1993). But in both cases we have been trying. Academics may be trying more than others. However, my contention is that if we stop thinking of religion as belief — as the ideas individuals might have about matters that do not or should not concern the State, government or wider society — *and* we fully engage with the idea that religion is as material and performative as sport, catering, politics or science (whatever they might be), then we could study it more skilfully and more appropriately. If we reject the duality objective/subjective (possibly along with other mystifying dualities) we may find more fluid and more relational ways in which to approach, analyse and debate the phenomena that interest us.

Fractal wrongness

There is a fractal wrongness (Lee 2001) about the European originated notion of religion as belief and transcendence that has misdirected our attention away from lived religion and towards a fantasy of irrationality. Being fractal, believing in belief has also implicated scholars of religion in trying to avoid the contagion of religious ideas. But as religion is a relational activity in a material and participative world, there are other ways for scholars to engage with it. Materials and performances “elsewhere” than in the fantasy world of believers and sceptics provide ways of experimenting with different relations and theories. When John Lennon invited us to “imagine ... no religion” he rejected obsessions with transcendence by the synonymous (to him) imagination of there being “no heaven no hell”. But he also invited us to “imagine there’s no countries” and should we chose to see the apparatus and ideology of nation States as the enveloping fiction in which “believers” are reformed for citizenship, we might find that religion can be re-imagined precisely as part of the ways in which people do live life for today. Perhaps this process of experimenting with the abandonment of believing (constituted as irrationality) may also enable us to hear other resonances in terms like “belief” and “faith” that do justice to the more relational implications of those religious discourses in which they occur. Perhaps our research and teaching would be enhanced by considering religious claims to have trusting relationships rather than unreasonable ideologies.

Rejecting the notion of *sui generis* religion seems straightforward in theory. The effort to wean ourselves off the notion that religion is a mask of society or cognition or some other similarly mysterious imaginary is proving more difficult. Experimenting with treating tea drinking, flower arranging, tree cutting and house building as religious activities — and not as mere expressions or representations of religion — might fully liberate us from obsessing about beliefs and liberate us to engage fully with lived religion. This is a multifaceted project that ought to inject considerable vigour into the study of religion and justify our demands to be heard by our scholarly peers in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary arenas as having something to say about important matters in the real world. Constellations of approaches to materiality, performance and relationality in vernacular and lived religion demand and reward efforts to engage more fully with real religion. This, however, requires that scholarship is also understood as a thoroughly relational performance.

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