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Essay: "Category Formation and 'Eastern Traditions'"

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Bulletin for the Study of Religion

Critical Questions Series 3: Category Formation and “Eastern” Traditions

Posted on June 14, 2013 by mattsheedy



This is the third instalment of the Critical Questions Series 3. The first post by Steven Ramey can be found [here](#) and the second by Nicole Goulet [here](#).

Question: *The varieties of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shinto, along with the “indigenous traditions” of Asia and the Pacific Islands, are commonly referred to as “Eastern” in the taxonomies of most introductory textbooks. What is your sense of where these categories stand today? How do you grapple with issues of category formation in the study of religion that have been historically filtered through a Euro-western lens? How does your own identity factor into the equation?*

When I was in graduate school at McGill University in Montréal, Canada, not so very long ago, the Faculty of Religious Studies taught two large undergraduate introductory religion courses: Western and Eastern Religions. Though this dichotomous representation of the “World’s Religions” had been commonplace for over a century, what surprised me was to discover that while the Western course included the usual suspects Christianity and Judaism, their “Abrahamic” sibling Islam was lumped with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism as “Eastern.” It seems I was not the only one surprised by this, since within several years a shift was made, such that Islam found itself (gladly or not!) “back” in the arms of the West. Of course, given the presence of Islam in the Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia, one could make the argument that it belongs to the East as much to the West. But then, the same case could be made for Christianity, which, though less present in Asia, has “conquered” huge swathes of Africa, even while declining in Europe.

All this to say, the grouping of religions into “Western” and “Eastern” is, to my mind, a hugely problematic legacy of colonial days—one that creates more problems than it solves. At the same time, the very fact that such categories exist, and have become so deeply engrained within scholarship on religion is itself, as they say, a “teachable moment.” Rather than deny or avoid them, however, my approach has been to begin with these divisions, and work with students to see what sense we can make of them.

It is certainly true that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have deep, shared roots, and can be fruitfully taught together. In doing so, however, it is important to emphasize the various “West Asian” cultural constructs that gave birth to all three traditions (in addition to the obvious Hellenistic or “Western” influences on all three). The so-called “Eastern” religions present a much more complicated scenario, however, since the major religions of Asia stem from at least two very different civilizational blocks: India and China (which are themselves, of course, extremely diverse).

The problem with the concept of the “East”—or, for that matter, “Asia”—is its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, geographical, political, and religious diversity. Having said that, as with the “Abrahamic” traditions, there are shared roots between the major Indian traditions—Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism—and also between those that emerged from Sinitic cultures: Daoism and Confucianism (and, to a lesser degree, Japanese Shinto).

Even divided into these three “sources”—West, South and southeast, and East Asia—however, the entire continent of Africa is left out (at least the indigenous traditions), as are North and South America. What we are left with then, in the end, is an Asia-centrism (or Silk-Road-centrism) to replace Euro-centrism. As long as we focus on the larger, institutionalized and often text-based traditions such as those listed above, this may be inevitable. As Steven Ramey has rightly noted in another post, these “big names” are also problematic.

As a European-Canadian Asianist, teaching in a Comparative Humanities Program at a large liberal arts college in the United States, I have many opportunities to explore and explode some of these categorical frameworks. A recent course I taught, entitled “Beat Zen, Square Zen: Buddhism in American Culture,” provided an excellent venue for discussion of the ways that one prototypical “Eastern” religion—Buddhism—has been variously described, defamed, romanticized and caricatured through Eurocentric and orientalist lenses for a century and a half. Yet, in this course I also took pains to stress that the concept of orientalism is in fact quite complex, and works both ways. Japanese Buddhist “reformers” in the Meiji period, for instance, effectively reconstructed a “modern” Buddhism that they felt, with some justification, could easily win over liberal, agnostic Westerners searching for something both “rational” and “spiritual.” This discourse occasionally borrowed from both Enlightenment and Marxist critiques of Western religions as superstitious “opiates”—using the West against the West, as it were. What makes this story interesting is that it subverts the standard critique of “orientalism” as being a Western colonialist imposition that demeans and/or exoticizes the Eastern “other.” Students were “disoriented,” but productively so—which is exactly what I aim for.

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