

## 17 RELIGION, ETHNICITY, THE NATION

Read: Aihwa Ong, 1990. State versus Islam: Malay families, women's bodies, and the body politic in Malaysia  
Kimberly Arkin, 2009. Rhinestone aesthetics and religious essence: Looking Jewish in Paris. *American Ethnologist* 36(4): 722-734. (8)

- I. Introduction: anthropological views about religion
  - A. Religion is seen as part of culture, a component of a particular cultural system
    1. In some conceptualizations of culture, each "culture" has a "religion"
    2. For example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote an ethnography, *The Nuer* about people in southern Sudan
      - a. Followed it with the book *Nuer Religion*
    3. Similarly, in the U.S. Southwest, the Navajo people speak the Navajo language and practice the Navajo religion
      - a. It's difficult to imagine what Navajo religion could be if someone who doesn't speak Navajo believed in it and practiced it
  - B. But for the most part religions are linked to culture (in the sense of "a culture"), nation, and ethnicity in more complicated fashion
    1. Example of world religions
    2. They are shared by many cultures, no matter how you define "culture"
      - a. Islam in Nigeria is very different from Islam in Indonesia
    3. To be successful such major religions must have a core set of meanings, symbols and practices that adapt fairly easily to different cultural contexts
      - a. Faint echoes of the original culture will remain
      - b. Because all world religions began in a single culture
      - c. There will be premises, assumptions, and sometimes language from the original culture
        - 1) The Hui are an example: Arabic loan words, calligraphy

- d. Traces of early Judaism in present-day Jewish and Christian religions?
  - 1) The lists approved-of practices and beliefs in the Bible that are no longer acceptable is extensive
  - 2) Polygyny, stoning to death, slaves, witches
- 4. Another influence: concepts and practices from cultural systems that existed *in between* the original cultural context and the present
  - a. Many Orthodox Jewish practices actually stem from Central European communities' practices from the last few centuries
    - 1) Clothing; shaving the bride's head at marriage and donning a wig
    - 2) Arkin mentions the growth of ultra-orthodox Jewish observance that includes "the wigs and dark suits of Eastern European shtetls" (p. 726)
- 5. There will be stronger connections between the culture that existed at the beginning of the religion and the present-day culture if it's in the same location
  - a. Islam and Judaism in the Middle East
  - b. Both religions developed in pastoralist (herding as well as agriculture), arid societies; these subsistence modes are reflected in many ways in texts (e.g., metaphors) and practices
  - c. **DISCUSS:** examples in Christianity?
- C. Missionaries, of course, proselytizing a religion, encounter difficulties when working among members of a very different culture
  - 1. The elderly nun interviewed in the video "Stolen Generations" says that earlier she hadn't known that in fact God was in the Aborigines long before the whites came to Australia
    - a. One must have a very ecumenical and abstract notion of God to be able to believe this
- D. Local variants of world religions can resemble the one-culture-one-religion model a bit more

1. “Greek” or “Russian” Orthodox
    - a. “Roman” Catholic is complicated because this Church has been so concerned with proselytizing, and has been successful
  2. But the phrases “Irish Catholic,” “Irish wake”
    - a. The image evoked is very different from the image of an Italian (Catholic) wake or a Polish (Catholic) one
    - b. All are Catholic
    - c. And anyone can become a Catholic
  3. Tibet is perhaps the best example of one-culture-one-religion model fashioned out of a world religion (Buddhism)
    - a. Tibetan Buddhism
      - 1) Illustrates a very strong imbrication of religion, culture, and political structures
      - 2) Tibet comes close to being a theocracy (the Dalai Lama is seen to be both the religious and political leader)
        - a) Although other religions are represented there
- E. Some world religions are seen to “belong” to certain populations
1. Even though they are practiced in many countries
  2. Judaism: Arkin’s discovery of the notion of the “*tête juive*”
    - a. Even though the aggregate of people who self-identify as Jews shows enormous physical variation
    - b. Example: Sammy Davis, an African-American entertainer in the US
      - 1) Converted to Judaism
      - 2) It was seen as odd—there were jokes about his not “looking Jewish”
    - c. Ethiopian Jews who migrated to Israel—Falashi—are seen as “odd” as well

- d. There is an association made between religion, culture, and “looking Jewish”<sup>1</sup>
  - e. Notions of Jewishness as raced can be quite pronounced among some categories of Jews
  - f. So there will be rulings, for instance, about organ transplants
  - g. The optional Kahn reading comes from book on the employment of new reproductive technologies in Israel<sup>2</sup>
    - 1) Fascinating study of the centrality of reproduction in Judaism and Jewish culture
    - 2) The state makes such treatments available to all Israelis, even unmarried secular women
  - h. Compare to “he doesn’t look Catholic”
    - 1) **DISCUSS:** what would that mean?
    - 2) Are you surprised when you see photographs of African Catholic bishops and cardinals?
3. A very different example: young Americans who followed South Asian gurus
- a. In the 1970s
  - b. Hare Krishna, Rajneesh
  - c. Evoked laughter because their bodies didn’t seem to belong in the saffron-colored robes, and their shaved heads looked odd
  - d. Hinduism, although practiced in many countries
    - 1) Is quite linked to India; not really a world religion
4. Additional point: many religions alter the body by inscribing religious symbols onto it
- a. Circumcision of Jewish and Muslim males

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<sup>1</sup> See Sander Gilman, 1991. *The Jew’s Body*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Kahn, Susan Martha, 2000. *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- b. Female genital cutting in areas of northern and central Africa
  - c. Such inscriptions serve many purposes
    - 1) Constantly remind the person they are members of a moral community—they can't do what they like with their bodies
    - 2) And are emblems: make the person easier to identify as a member of X culture; practitioner of X religion
    - 3) **DISCUSS:** does this sound like Nagel's definition of ethnic identity?
    - 4) These body inscriptions can be seen as reminders, internal and external
- F. And some religions are found in many parts of the globe, but, like Hinduism, are not world religions
- 1. Roma (Gypsy) beliefs form part of what makes them distinct
  - 2. We can say the same for the Hutterites, an Anabaptist sect in Canada and the U.S.
    - a. Anabaptists broke away from mainstream Protestant religions in Europe
    - b. Were persecuted; came to New World (like other persecuted religious minorities—the Puritans, Quakers)
      - 1) But Anabaptists chose to remain apart; some continued to speak German; the Hutterites live in huge communal farms
    - c. Because of missionization, Anabaptists (e.g., Mennonites) are found in places like Nicaragua and Paraguay

## II. The relationship between religion and ethnic and national *identity*

- A. Cross-culturally and over time this is an extremely varied and complicated matter
- B. If your notion of culture follows a cookie-cutter model, if you see cultures as little islands, bounded, unchanging, internally homogeneous
  - 1. You'll have a lot of trouble when you look at the real world

2. The model obviously doesn't work for religions
  3. Even though a religion may *appear* to be fairly straightforwardly linked to a nationality and a locality—a culture
    - a. Above example of Tibetan religion
    - b. But if we were to study Tibetan history we would have to understand the spread of Buddhism
    - c. Look at the fame of the current Dalai Lama; what he represents, who his followers are. What produced this?
      - 1) He visited MIT in 2003; conference with a panel of scientists
      - 2) His international fame has everything to do with geopolitical politics—China's hegemony, Tibetan resistance, Western support of the resistance (in some quarters), international human rights movement
- C. Despite obstacles, studying the relationship between religion, nation and ethnicity (and, sometimes, race) is crucial
1. Even though it is so varied and complex
  2. Because this relationship so often is extremely important
- III. Notion of ethnicity and nationality as relationships goes for religion as well
- A. How a given religion is born, how it evolves
1. Depends on its relationship with other religions it is in contact with
  2. As well as the relationships between the cultures and societies of its adherents and non-adherents
- B. The Hui see themselves as Muslim in some fashion (even the ones who are not practicing Muslims)
1. And part of their nationality identity connects them to Arabia/Persia via their religious beliefs
    - a. An identity that in this respect is not-China, in the sense of not-Han

- b. Certainly they are Chinese citizens
      - c. But it's more complicated, and certainly has changed over time
    - 2. **DISCUSS:** provide an example of an ethnicity or nationality that doesn't evoke religion at all
  - C. Another example: the relationship between colonized people and the colonizers
    - 1. Colonial powers have greatly influenced, over time, the nature of the religion(s) practiced in their colonies
      - a. Tibetan religion and nationalism changed as a result of occupation by PRC
        - 1) Here local religion is a sign of resistance
        - 2) This happens often
      - 2. Religions may be introduced by colonizers
        - a. Conversion may be coerced
          - 1) The Inca empire, when it overtook other societies
          - 2) African slaves in the U.S. and Caribbean
        - b. Or voluntarily adopted (Christianity in Africa, Islam in many parts of the world)
  - D. Transnational movement affects religious observance
    - 1. Buddhist Koreans converted to Christianity in substantial numbers when they immigrated to U.S. and Canada
- IV. "New religions"
  - A. Of interest to us because they are so important in ethnic, national processes
    - 1. All "new religions" draw on already existing religious components—symbolism, ritual, etc.
  - B. New religions may spring up in response to changes, pressures, oppression
    - 1. Example: Christianity: ancient Israel was a colony of Imperial Rome

2. Example: among Iroquois in New York state and Canada, the Handsome Lake revitalization movement
  3. As is the Ghost Dance adopted by Plains Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
  4. **DISCUSS:** other examples?
    - a. Nation of Islam in the US (optional reading)
  5. Some “new religions” are short-lived
- C. Another kind of “new” religion:
1. Is a blend of two or more “old” religions
  2. This kind is called a syncretistic religion
    - a. Comes about through forces of creolization, amalgamation, assimilation
    - b. *Santería* in this country
      - 1) Combination of Yoruba and Spanish Catholicism
      - 2) With concomitant associations with certain Hispanic groups
    - c. *Voudoun* in Haiti another example
      - 1) Combination of West African and French Catholicism
      - 2) Now serves as a symbol of the Haitian people
    - d. Similar religions in other countries have different names: Macumba, Candomblé in Brazil
- D. Religions that claim to be “rational”
1. Scientology
  2. “Rational,” secular states that see religious practice as old-fashioned, not modern
    - a. Illustrated in the optional article by Malarney on Viet Nam

- b. They promote the philosophies/ideologies that undergird them as replacements for religion
      - c. The “cult” of Mao Tse Tung in China
  - E. Another type are religions that claim to be reviving old, extinct religions
    - 1. Wicca (witchcraft) in the U.S. and England
      - a. No major association with a current ethnic group, but do link themselves to a persecuted group in the past: Druids
    - 2. Are syncretistic
- V. Forces behind religious change
- A. Are quite often powerfully linked to nation, ethnicity and related topics
    - 1. They appear as responses to crisis, or to felt needs not being met
    - 2. Changes are threatening, and the old religion cannot account for them
    - 3. Fundamentalist movements
      - a. Can, but usually don't, produce radical change
      - b. The Iranian revolution is an example of radical change connected to fundamentalism
    - 4. **DISCUSS**: other less sweeping examples of “fundamentalism”?
      - a. “Revitalization”: the Islamic revival movement described by Ong
  - B. As a religion grows and becomes established, it will become associated with the society that mainstreams it
    - 1. May not be an entire nation-state, however
    - 2. Can be the source of a great deal of conflict

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