



# **Alternative Voices**

A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies

Edited by Afe Adogame, Magnus Echtler,  
Oliver Freiberger

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



# Critical Studies in Religion/ Religionswissenschaft (CSRRW)

Edited by  
Gregor Ahn, Oliver Freiberger,  
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Volume 4

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

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A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies

Essays in Honor of Ulrich Berner

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Afe Adogame, Magnus Echtler, Oliver Freiberger

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Cover image: "Indian Summer in Connecticut"  
by Yodakalk at the German language Wikipedia.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-525-54017-6  
ISBN 978-3-647-54017-7 (e-book)

© 2013, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen/  
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht LLC, Bristol, CT, U.S.A.  
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Typesetting by: Konrad Triltsch GmbH, Ochsenfurt  
Printed and bound in Germany by Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Printed on non-aging paper.

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Afe Adogame, Magnus Echter, Oliver Freiberger

## Introduction

As an academic discipline, Religious Studies is at a creative threshold in an increasingly pluralistic era. As a multifarious phenomenon, religion is approached more and more from transdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives. The historical, comparative, and cross-cultural study of religions throughout the world, from antiquity to the present, shows that virtually all traditions have institutional and popular forms that cross-fertilize and mutually reinforce one another. In presenting the histories, development, belief systems, and ritual patterns of specific religious groups, scholarship often privileges the official level of religiosity to the detriment and total neglect of alternative, dissonant, and resurgent voices. Rather than the sole reliance on an official voice, varied dimensions and alternative voices also contribute to enriching our understanding of specific religious traditions or phenomena.

The contributions in this volume serve two purposes. They seek to demonstrate, on the one hand, how listening to alternative voices – in religions and in scholarship about religion – is a quintessential, although often neglected, activity in the academic study of religions. At the same time, they are meant to honor Professor Ulrich Berner, on the occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the inspiration his work has given (and continues to give) for studying religion and religions with this plurality approach. Besides, his research interests straddle the religions of late antiquity and contemporary religious forms and experience. It is rare to find scholars of religion who combine these two broad historical epochs. His scholarly interest has been to build a bridge between them rather than treat them as disparate, mutually exclusive eras. He is apt in showing that ‘nothing is really new under the sun’ as far as the history of religions in the world is concerned. He contrasts ancient and extant religious forms and traditions, often drawing significant historical parallels and demonstrating how they are similar and different, and how each phenomenon or tradition is shaped by its respective social, cultural milieu.

Beginning in 1967, Ulrich Berner studied Theology, Philosophy, History of Religions, Indology, and Buddhist Studies at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen where he received his doctoral degree in 1974. His thesis, supervised by Carsten Colpe, analyzed the concepts of soul, immortality, and resurrection in the work of the Alexandrian theologian and philosopher Origen (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century) and argued that the classical phenomenology of

religion had failed to explain such concepts adequately.<sup>1</sup> Right after completing his Ph.D. Ulrich Berner worked as a post-doctoral fellow in the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 13 (*Orientalistik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Religions- und Kulturgeschichte des Vorderen und Mittleren Orients*), first in Colpe's project, then in Gernot Wießner's research group. Subsequently he was assistant professor (*wissenschaftlicher Assistent*) of History of Religions at Göttingen (1978–1984). In 1980 he completed his *Habilitationsschrift* which was published by Harrassowitz in 1982.<sup>2</sup> In this book he develops a theory (or, as he calls it, a heuristic model) of syncretism that provides a refined terminology for the analysis of religious encounter, based on and advancing sociological systems theory. Analyzing, as a case study, the encounter of Christianity and philosophy in Origen's work, he demonstrates the model's applicability for a concrete historical context. Between 1980 and 1984 Ulrich Berner also taught, as visiting professor, at the universities of Hamburg, Bonn, and Bremen and was a Heisenberg fellow in 1984/1985. In 1986 he was appointed professor and chair of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) at the University of Bayreuth, where he has taught ever since.

Working at Bayreuth University, which was to become a renowned center for African studies, Ulrich Berner developed an additional interest in African religions, first in the religious concepts, imagery and symbolism appropriated by African novelists, then also in new indigenous religious movements in Africa. His activities within the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 214 (*Identität in Afrika*) led to the supervision of a number of doctoral theses, of which the very first was written by one of this book's editors (Afe Adogame), who also worked in the department several years afterwards. Over many years Berner has been involved in African studies and brought a large number of African scholars of religion to Bayreuth – as Ph.D. students, visiting lecturers, Humboldt scholars, or guest researchers –, and over time these activities made Bayreuth the major center for the study of African religions that it is today.

In his research Ulrich Berner also kept pursuing his interests in late antiquity and medieval Europe, as well as in Indian religions. His insistence on reading texts in their original languages manifested in offering regular reading courses in which students discussed relevant texts in Latin and Greek. In addition, a visiting professor was hired to teach Sanskrit. Later the Sanskrit course became a regular offering, taught first by his assistant – another one of this book's editors (Oliver Freiberger) –, and then by Michaela Berner (who, being a language genius, also speaks Arabic fluently and teaches Hebrew at her

1 U. Berner, *Selbstinterpretation und Unsterblichkeitsglaube in Religion und Religionswissenschaft: Untersuchungen über alttestamentliche und frühchristlich-alexandrinische Texte und zur historischen Religionsphänomenologie* (Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität, 1974).

2 U. Berner, *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffes*, Göttinger Orientalforschungen: Reihe Grundlagen und Ergebnisse, Band 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1982).

husband's department). At the same time, every semester he ran a colloquium on method and theory in the study of religion, in which advanced and doctoral students discussed classical and current approaches in the study of religion and their applications to their own fields of interest. The colloquium forum has proved invaluable as a theoretical laboratory and methodological breeding ground for most scholars and students who took part in it in the last two decades.

Whoever gets to know Ulrich Berner quickly realizes that his thirst for new and interesting questions, sources, and theories is virtually unquenchable. Besides the fields mentioned above, he discovered fascinating material in places where scholars of religion seldom stray. Being an accomplished flutist, a connoisseur of classical music, and a lover of modern art, he has studied opera librettos, composers' biographies, and the work of modern painters from a religious studies point of view. As the son of a forester, he has a deep interest in analyzing religious conceptions of, and controversies about, nature, animals, and the environment. And he has worked on multiple other topics that range from mission history to analytic philosophy of religion, from the concept of monotheism to that of skepticism and atheism, from the controversial notion of religious tolerance to that of interreligious dialogue, and from large-scale models of religious globalization to the specifics of South African prison gangs. His interests in theory are equally broad, most recently manifest in the application of cognitive models and of Bourdieu's field theory, which has attracted his increasing focus through the research of this book's third editor (Magnus Echter), who studied under Berner and now works as his assistant.

Even more remarkable than the general interest in all such topics is the fact that Ulrich Berner discussed them all in scholarly writing. A large number of publications, mostly journal articles and contributions in edited volumes, along with monographs and edited books, constitute an impressive oeuvre that is as broad as it is deep.<sup>3</sup> While the areas and the themes are numerous, we do perceive a certain thread that runs through many, if not most, of his publications. It is a particular approach to religion which, to our knowledge, he has never laid out theoretically in greater detail but which has a powerful presence in his analysis of the material. It is a way of studying religion that takes the plurality of voices in each particular religious context seriously. Refusing to accept the superiority of narratives that are constructed by victorious, privileged fractions of religious communities, this approach insists that scholars of religion must include in their analyses the existing alternative views, opinions, and conceptions in any given moment in history. Following this approach means bringing to light numerous religious beliefs and practices that were neglected by previous scholarship, and exposing the discourses, conflicts, and power relations in any particular context. It forces

3 The complete (and constantly growing) list of his publications is easily accessible online at [http://www.relwiss1.uni-bayreuth.de/de/team/Professoren/Berner\\_Ulrich/](http://www.relwiss1.uni-bayreuth.de/de/team/Professoren/Berner_Ulrich/).

scholars to study religion as an ever-contested and dynamic process rather than a static institution, as it is normally conceptualized by dominant religious élites. And as he has shown, this approach can also be applied to the history – and present – of the academic study of religion itself.

Among the many scholars who have been inspired by Ulrich Berner's plurality approach are the contributors of this volume. They are colleagues, students, and friends of his, but most of all, they are scholars who enthusiastically agree with his view that listening to alternative voices is not only interesting but methodologically essential for a better understanding of religion. This is the leading principle of the following chapters. They cover many areas that coincide with Ulrich Berner's interests: religious traditions of Africa, Europe, and Asia; areas less commonly studied by scholars of religion, such as literature, law, and atheism; and the discipline of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*). Focusing on the plurality approach, these studies impressively demonstrate its methodological benefits for the academic study of religion.

The volume is thematically arranged into four parts. As the themes overlap, some individual contributions could have well been grouped differently. The main objective of this structure is to suggest major dimensions of the plurality approach that are exemplified in many ways by the individual chapters.

In Part One, "*Religion*" as a Contested Category, the volume begins by addressing discourses about the most fundamental term of Religious Studies as a discipline. The authors discuss the multiple facets of the category "religion" and suggest methodological and theoretical approaches to deal with such problems productively. In the first chapter, Gregory Alles studies the concepts of religion among indigenous people (*ādivāsī*) in contemporary Gujarat (Northwest India). His analysis shows that the emic categories (*dharm*, *saṃskṛti*, *nuṃgra*, *bhagat*) appear as ambiguous and contested as the English terms *religion*, *culture*, *indigenous*, and *Hindu*, into which they are often translated by local actors. Considering the impressive plurality of views that Alles recorded – and that keeps eluding a neat classification –, the question of his title, "Do *Ādivāsīs* have religion?" can best be answered with the remark: "Depends on whom you ask and what terms you use." This plurality of voices helps scholars of religion to become aware of the weakness of the term "religion" as an analytic category. But it also demonstrates that emic terms are not stronger in this respect – and equally contested.

Dirk Johannsen's chapter discusses other interesting sources that few scholars of religion use, let alone specialize in. He analyzes Scandinavian narrative literature in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on two influential novelists. Contrary to a common view in literary studies that there was a "religious crisis" among writers of that period that they eventually overcame, Johannsen suggests that a closer look yields a different conclusion. He shows that while the atheist worldview of those writers persisted, they did recognize religion located inside the individual and acknowledged certain religious

(Christian) ethics. The chapter argues that the voices of the narratives' protagonists not only reflected the authors' worldview but also impacted the readers' (and thus, society's) notion of 'religion' at the time.

*Johannes Quack* discusses how Ulrich Berner's focus on alternative voices of different actors with differing agendas contributes to the identity formation of the academic discipline *Religionswissenschaft*, and to the circumscription of its subject of study, religion. Quack argues that the concept of the religious field – instead of a *sui generis* definition of religion – expands the subject for the study of religion, as it includes all actors with vested interests in the field, e. g. atheists who challenge the authority of other, usually more traditionally 'religious' actors. Parallel to this expansion of the field of study Quack suggests a shift from 'religion' to 'religiosity,' as the identification of various religiosities – skeptical, dogmatic, fundamentalist, etc. – within one religious tradition, allows for a critique of monolithic conceptions of 'religion.'

Part Two of the volume, *The Plurality of Voices in Religious, Cultural, and Ethnic Encounters*, contains case studies of religious actors responding to 'the other' – religious, cultural, or ethnic – in a variety of ways. *Jacob Olupona's* chapter portrays glimpses of Ifa's encounter with Islam and the inter-textual relations the two traditions maintain. Central to the chapter is not the 'truth' of the narratives but how the Babalawos in their imagination construct the Muslims "other" and the tradition they represent. This kind of interpretation points to processes of religious evolution in Nigeria. Ulrich Berner's greatest legacy, according to Olupona, is that he encourages intertextual and interdisciplinary work. Thus, the central argument of the chapter is to show how the Islamic motifs in Ifa narratives can foster interdisciplinary and cross-cultural scholarship.

*Michael Pye's* chapter analyzes Chinese temples in contemporary South East Asia (Malaysia and Singapore) and Taiwan. It discusses the ways in which symbolic representations of various religious traditions in those temples are put in a relation to each other through their spatial arrangements, thereby reflecting certain kinds of syncretism. A variety of syncretistic "positions" in syncretistic "situations" reflects a plurality of syncretisms in Chinese temples that defies homogenizing analysis. Pye shows that even within one and the same temple, alternative significations and orientations are observable.

*Luther Martin* discusses the presence – or rather, absence – of the Mithras cult in Roman Egypt. As the Mithras cult, a religion that was widespread in the Roman Empire, had strong relations with the military and as the Romans had substantial deployments in Egypt, it seems surprising that within the plurality of religions in Egypt the Mithras cult was almost absent. Martin argues that because the competing "indigenous" deities Sarapis and Isis fulfilled many of the religious functions that Mithras addresses as well, the latter's cult did not become as popular there as it did in other regions of the empire. Later, when Christianity, sanctioned by the emperor, became the dominant force, both the Mithras cult in the West and the Sarapis/Isis cult in Egypt were on the decline.

*Lukas Bormann's* chapter discusses the concept of ethnicity in early Christianity and the latter's encounter with other ethnic groups. It suggests that in this historical context the notion of Christian universalism is ambiguous. Some New Testament texts clearly distinguish Jews and Greeks and encourage proselytization among the latter. But, as Bormann shows, other ethnic groups, namely Scythians and Barbarians, were not viewed as targets for conversion. Originally, Paul's "universalism" did not extend beyond Greeks. Only in later parts of the New Testament alternative views appear that, hesitantly, call for mission among those ethnic groups.

*Asonzeh Ukah* describes the activities of Nigerian Pentecostal pastors in South Africa. The pastors consider themselves missionaries who bring salvation to the South African blacks whom they conceive as being stuck on the stage of ancestor worship, a result of the long Apartheid history. Being part of the prosperity gospel, the salvation the Nigerians offer includes worldly success, and is therefore validated by the wealth of the pastors. However, it is precisely the pastors' wealth that incites the South African laity to challenge the authority of the pastors with concepts like accountability, religious fraud, or transparency. It is thus in this intercultural context that alternative voices challenge the Nigerian hegemony in African Pentecostalism.

Part Three of the book, *Alternative Voices within Religious Traditions*, addresses the plurality within particular religious traditions and highlights voices that constitute an alternative to the (perceived) dominant view. *David Westerlund's* chapter outlines various Muslim views on health care in Sweden and intra-Muslim debates about such issues. With possibly about 400,000 people who have some kind of Muslim identity, Islam is now an important part of the religious and societal landscape in Sweden. This figure refers to a very heterogeneous group, ranging from strictly practicing individuals to non-practicing agnostics or atheists with "Muslim" names and cultural background. Among practicing Swedish Muslims, there is also a wide variety of different movements, organizations and interpretations of Islam. The chapter's primary focus is on the views of moderately Islamist Muslims who took the initiative in creating and supporting such clinics inspired by Islamic thinking in the primary care sector. A secondary aim is to highlight the opposing attitudes of other Muslims who represent two other main positions or discourses: (1) liberal and often Sufi-influenced critics and (2) more secularly oriented people.

*Gabriele Cappai* uses the actors' perspective in order to challenge the notion of Sharia as the monolithic and unchanging divine law that governs all aspects of society. He analyses socio-cultural determinants of action on macro- and meso-levels, and distinguishes between three dimensions of action: opportunities, beliefs and interests. Thereby he shows the multi-voicedness of an apparently unified phenomenon, as well as the interconnectedness of religious and other socio-cultural factors.

*Ezra Chitando's* chapter examines the transformation of indigenous beliefs

and practices in rural Zimbabwe. It focuses on how the HIV and AIDS crisis has precipitated a rethinking of “ancestral traditions.” Essentially, the chapter contends that African Indigenous Religions have never been “closed.” Although ideologically there is a conviction that the oracles from the remote past will be upheld by future generations without any changes, in reality these religions have always been open and adaptable. In fact, they share this characteristic with all the religions of the world. No religion can survive without being open, adaptable and syncretistic. In this chapter, the author seeks to illustrate the notion of openness, adaptability and flexibility with special reference to Zimbabwean Indigenous Religions and HIV and AIDS. This chapter has utilised one of Ulrich Berner’s key theoretical insights to demonstrate how, in the face of a deadly epidemic, Shona Indigenous Religion decided to “re-open the canon” in order to promote life in the face of death. Providing effective responses meant rejecting and recasting some of the beliefs and practices. This necessitated the triumph of the subordinate traditions that are always contesting ideological fixation and rigidity within the religious tradition.

*Jörg Rüpke* asks the question, “What is a sacred site?” but quickly adds that the question should rather be, “When or for whom is a site sacred?” Drawing on many examples from Roman religion, he problematizes the common term “sacred” – or, “The Sacred” – and asks who the actors are that make a cultic site (his preferred term) “sacred”. He also discusses the relationship between space and image in Roman temples and the religious experience related to them as noted in the textual material. To all these issues religious people had multiple and partly contradictory responses. A sacred (or, cultic) site, he concludes, is thus not defined by some aspect of “the sacred” but rather by the religious practices performed at that place and the plurality of emic opinions about its sacredness or non-sacredness.

*Wotsuna Khamalwa’s* chapter suggests an interconnectedness between ritual practice and socio-economic development, showing that religion is integral to the social fabric of Ugandan society. Religion shapes economic behavior, while economic activities are impacted by religious belief and practice. He maps how the seventies and eighties witnessed a drastic decline in socio-economic development in Uganda after Dictator Idi Amin’s coup d’état in 1971. Since the nineties, there has been steady economic recovery and liberalization of sectors such as media and banking. This recovery has also led to massive rural-urban migration, creating many slum/shanty villages/towns on the low lying outskirts of urban centers, especially the capital Kampala. In the wake of the economic and religious renaissance, the phenomenon of child murders appeared. This chapter explores the link between “ritual murders” and the widening gap between the rich and the poor on the one hand, and the influence of the “prosperity gospel” churches and the “witch doctors” on the other. It shows how mainstream and non-mainstream religions as well as religious specialists are attempting to carve out spaces and a niche for themselves within a neoliberal economy.



*Katharina Wilkens's* chapter offers invaluable insights into the dynamics of cultural norms and practices by exploring alternative voices and the ritual process of 'drinking the Quran' for healing in Tanzania. According to the actors, the Quran, as the Word of God, has the power to bless and to heal. The direct ingestion of divine blessing offers rich material to the scholar of religion interested in religious practices contested and disparaged by conventional, dominant discourses. Aesthetics of religion lays its focus consequently on embodiment, performance, materiality and sensuality and interprets theological discourses and social power struggles from that perspective. It offers new insights into the plurality of religious practices and neglected voices by opening up new interdisciplinary pathways and methods of analyzing non-textual data. The chapter argues that describing the practice of drinking of the Quran as a material use of literacy techniques for the purpose of healing reveals a material mode of religiosity that should not be glossed as "magic" or "folk religion."

*Umar Danfulani's* and *Theophilus John Angbashim's* chapter comparatively examines the origin and growth of two anti-witchcraft movements that emerged in the Benue valley of Nigeria as protest movements – the Moavu-embaga of the Eggon and the Adzov of the Tiv in Central Nigeria. The work is situated in ritual performance, especially in anti-witchcraft rituals, rituals of protest, and in gender and cross-gender roles. The study applies Harvey Whitehouse's Divergent Modes of Religiosity (DMR) theory on the Eggon Moavu-embaga and the Tiv Adzov anti-witchcraft movements to measure the development rate from their cult format towards being a full fledged doctrinal religion, using the indices developed by the DMR theory.

Finally, Part Four of the volume, *Plurality in the Study of Religion*, is concerned with theory and methodology in religious studies. Its chapters suggest ways in which the plurality approach can be integrated in the academic study of religion. *Christoph Boehinger* explores the notion of alternative voices with regard to religious pluralism. He cautions to distinguish between emic and etic concepts, and suggests to use the term religious pluralism as referring to the normative concept that seeks to promote the peaceful living together of various religious traditions, and the term religious plurality to the description of the interaction of religious traditions – whether peaceful or not – based on empirical study. In his view, the study of religion should restrict itself to the study of religious plurality. In practical application, the study of religion could provide secondary school education on religious plurality, in distinction to the religious education offered by the theologies of the various religious traditions, and thus provide an alternative voice to the discourses on religious pluralism.

*James Cox's* chapter continues the theoretical debate concerning the appropriate relationships between Religious Studies, Theology and the Social Sciences. Following an academic tradition represented broadly by Ninian Smart, Cox attempts to disengage the concept of 'the sacred' or 'divine' from

the core of religion and instead locating the study of religion squarely within social and cultural contexts. In this chapter Cox revisits Walter Capps' discussion on the *sine qua non* of religion – that without which religion is not religion. He takes up Capps' challenge that scholars locate the *sine qua non* of religion, as a starting point in the attempt to separate the sacred from religion and thereby disarm the host of recent critics of Religious Studies. He established a theoretical framework whereby we can lay to rest the connection between the academic study of religion and theology and at the same time maintain a place for Religious Studies as a broadly based but distinct scholarly discipline.

The volume concludes with *James Spickard's* chapter. Spickard argues that despite a longstanding scholarly concern with the distinction between 'facts' and 'values', plus professional canons that separate academics from everyday life, there is an inherent connection between the scholarly attention to intellectual pluralism and a life devoted to expanding opportunities for those whom the academy has traditionally left out. This chapter explores their intellectual nexus in the context of a critique of post-colonial theory's anti-universalism. It argues that scholarly inquiry is grounded, epistemologically, in a post-Enlightenment quest for 'truth', conceived not foundationally but as a regulative ideal – i. e., as an ideal that governs human conduct. This ideal orients inquiry in such a manner as to demand socio-intellectual inclusion rather than exclusion and equality rather than hierarchy. Building on the work of C.S. Pierce, the chapter shows that these are not, as in static epistemologies, matters of a priori value-choice, but are instead matters of practical (and necessary) eschatological faith. Living an academic life in the contemporary world is thus simultaneously a matter of intellectual and moral import, in which the inclusion of under-represented voices plays a central role.

When we began approaching potential contributors for this volume, the response was overwhelming. In spite of the time constraints and the looming peer review connected with this book series, very few on our first list had to decline. The space limits set by the publisher, which we could not match by merely withdrawing our own contributions, put us in an awkward position. Not only did we have to stop approaching potential contributors, we even had to ask some colleagues to withdraw their suggested contributions, to which they gracefully agreed. Many more scholars, too numerous to list here individually, would have liked to contribute to this volume and honor Professor Berner, and we are grateful for their understanding.

We wish to thank the publisher, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, and the editors of the series *Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft* for their support in publishing this volume. Like the series, the book is bilingual, which attests to the national and international impact of Ulrich Berner's work. Finally, we wish to thank the authors who produced superb scholarship that aptly demonstrates the need for, and the benefits of, listening to alternative voices as we study religion.



Part One  
“Religion” as a Contested Category



Gregory D. Alles

## Do *Ādivāsīs* Have Religion?<sup>1</sup>

Contesting “Religion” and “Culture” in Eastern Gujarat

“I would suggest that to call something ‘religion’ in the absence of a comparable indigenous lexeme is not in itself an act of imperialist aggression, but neither is it intellectually sufficient. In support of such usage, one ought to be able to provide a nuanced description of the item in question, informed by local as well as exogenous knowledge, justifying its characterization as ‘religious’.” – Bruce Lincoln<sup>2</sup>

I was an “illegal alien,” as they say in the U.S. I was required to register within 14 days of entering India, and here I was, sitting in the registration office on day 17. Would it matter that I had a story to tell?

I had accidentally left my papers at home. By the time I got them, on day 12, it was a holiday. The next day, Friday, day 13, I had tried to register in Gandhinagar, where the institution with which I was affiliated was located, but the officer in charge was taking a long weekend. His subordinates told me to go back to Chhota Udepur, where I was living, and register there. On Saturday I tried to do that, only to be told that I was in the wrong place. “Go to Baroda on Monday,” day 16, the officer said. Then he added reassuringly, “Don’t worry. You will get it.” But after a weekend spent gathering documents, a bumpy three-hour bus ride, and a short afternoon’s wait, I did not get it. The Chhota Udepur police had to verify my residence. So after another three-hour bus ride back to Chhota Udepur, a two-hour night-time jeep ride cross country with four police officers in search of my landlady, whom I had never met, a second three-hour bus ride back to Vadodara the next day, and five hours of waiting in

1 The fieldwork on which this essay is based was funded by the Fulbright program administered by the U.S.–Indian Educational Foundation, Delhi. For help in the field I especially want to thank Ashvinbhai Rathva (Kanalva), Dashrath Rathva (Kocvad), Desing Rathva (Rangpur), Govindbhai Rathva (Padharvant), Rajindra Varia (Tejgadh), and Kemraj Bhaghora (Dungargarh, Rajasthan), as well as Dr. Arvind Pratap and his medical team, which took me along for rides. An initial version of this essay was presented at the Congress of the International Association of the History of Religion held in Toronto in August 2010. My thanks for helpful comments are due to the participants there as well as to my colleagues Jill Krebs and Lester Vogel.

2 B. Lincoln, “Concessions, Confessions, Clarifications, Ripostes: By Way of Response to Tim Fitzgerald”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19 (2007): 163–168, on p. 167.

the registration office, I was finally going to meet the person in charge. He would sign my form and make me a legal alien, or so I hoped.

“You are affiliated with an institution in Gandhinagar, but you are living in Chhota Udepur, six hours away, and working at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh [about 15 kilometers from Chhota Udepur]?” I want to study *ādivāsī* [tribal] people, so I need to live where they live. “Then why aren’t you living in Tejgadh, if you’re working in Tejgadh?” I don’t know. There’s no hotel in Tejgadh. I’ve always stayed in Chhota Udepur during shorter visits. It didn’t occur to me to live in Tejgadh. “Why are you registering in Vadodara?” I was told to register in Vadodara, but I’ll register anywhere you tell me to. [Please, just let me register.] “What exactly do you plan to research?” Rāṭhvā religion. “But there is no Rāṭhvā religion. Rāṭhvā is a culture. If you’re interested in religion, you should study Hinduism. Have you studied the classical tradition of Hinduism?”

I have always considered disagreements about the categories of religion and culture to be rather academic. Were they going to get me deported?

This was only the first of many times that I encountered contestations with regard to *ādivāsī dharm* and *saṃskṛti* in Vadodara district, Gujarat. (English speakers in the area usually unreflectively translate these terms “religion” and “culture,” respectively, but for the sake of accuracy I will retain the original Gujarati.) *Ādivāsīs*, India’s “first inhabitants,” commonly known in Indian English as tribals, are sometimes referred to in scholarly parlance as indigenous people, although conservative caste Hindus claim to be indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, too. They constitute about 8 % of the total Indian population, and about 15 % of the population of the state of Gujarat, where they are concentrated in the border regions. One such *ādivāsī* area includes Chhota Udepur and Kavant talukas in Vadodara district (in the process of becoming Chhota Udepur district as this book goes to press), along the border with Madhya Pradesh just north of the Narmada River, where *ādivāsīs*, mostly Rāṭhvās, constitute a large majority of the population.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I attempt to map the contestations with regard to *ādivāsī dharm* and *saṃskṛti* that I observed in these talukas, then to reflect a little on where this diversity leaves a scholar of religions like me. At issue is only a subset of the practices – and beliefs, too, but I will talk mostly about practices – among *ādivāsīs* that a neutral scholar might identify as religious, specifically, the subset of practices known locally as *numgra* (in standard Gujarati, *nagurum*, *nūgarum*, “without guru or teacher, irreverent, shameless”). These practices are generally considered to constitute traditional *ādivāsī* practices, as distinct from those “newly” introduced by *bhagat* or devotional movements that mostly originate from within caste Hinduism (Swaminarayan, Sat Kaival,

3 According to the 2001 Census *ādivāsīs* made up 87 % of the population of Chhota Udepur taluka and 93 % of the population of Kavant taluka.

Meladi Ma, and so on).<sup>4</sup> The most obvious differences between *numgras* and *bhagats* is that *numgras* eat meat and drink alcohol and so slaughter chickens and goats and pour oblations of liquor in their ceremonies. *Bhagats* are (supposed to be) strict vegetarian tee-totallers in every area of life, including those we normally designate religious. As some *numgras* see it, *bhagats* think of themselves as superior to *numgras* and refuse to associate with them on some occasions, such as meals. I also know of several mixed couples, one spouse, usually male, being *numgra*, the other spouse, usually female, being *bhagat*.

### Views from Outside

My theme is not lexicographical. I am not concerned here with the proper definitions of the words *dharm* and *samskr̥ti*. It is about how people use these words. A high percentage of *ādivāsīs* in the area are non-literate, and still today one encounters (presumed) teenagers who do not know their ages and have never been to school. That does not mean, however, that people cannot differ on matters of *dharm* and *samskr̥ti*. They not only can but do.

One point is locally uncontested: the practices of caste Hindus are *dharm*, specifically, Hindu *dharm*. The practices of *bhagats* are routinely considered Hindu, so they are unequivocally *dharm*, too. Furthermore, no one that I know of disputes that *Khristī dharm* (Christianity) and *Musalmānī dharm* (Islam) are *dharms*, even if some people take rather dim views of them. The question about *dharm* arises in the case of traditional *ādivāsī* practices, that is, *numgra* practices. Differences of opinion about these practices exist both within and outside of the *ādivāsī* community. They are complicated by the related question of whether *ādivāsīs* are in fact Hindus, as the Census of India has tended to assume.

Some people outside the *ādivāsī* community unhesitatingly consider *numgra* practices to be *dharm*. In my experience they include both Hindus and Christians. Other outsiders, however, like the Superintendent of Police, Vadodara Rural District, who signed my registration papers, do not – although our conversation had been in English, so we had used the word “religion.”

People give different reasons for denying that *numgra* practices are *dharm*. One of them is normative. People holding rather different political

4 For the broader historical context, see, e.g., D. Hardiman, “Assertion, Conversion and Indian Nationalism: Govind’s Movement amongst the Bhils”, in R. Robinson/S. Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255–284, on pp. 257–259, 271, and D. Hardiman, *Histories for the Subordinated* (London: Seagull, 2007), 57–94, 185–252; A. Tilche, *In Search of an Adivasi Worldview: Identity, Development and the Adivasi Museum of Voice in Western India*, Ph.D. dissertation (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011), 90–94.



convictions, for example, both Gandhians and BJP partisans, have customarily considered *ādivāsīs* backward and in need of improvement. *Numgra* practices – eating meat, drinking alcohol, sacrificing animals to *devs* – have been among the most common targets of the moral reformers. On such grounds *numgra* practices have been considered devoid of both *dharm* and *saṃskṛti*, the latter in the sense of “civilization” or capital-c Culture. In these judgments, however, the normative force of *dharm* appears to be stronger than that of *saṃskṛti*, because at least some who adopt this view consider at least some *numgra* practices to be *saṃskṛti* but not *dharm*. For example, several upper caste students at the Government Polytechnic Chhota Udepur, viewing instances of possession among *ādivāsī* women that I had video-recorded, pronounced them to be *saṃskṛti* but not *dharm*. They did so even though a couple of them thought that the *ādivāsī* women really might be possessed by *devs*.

A school principal told me a different tale. In his view *ādivāsī* practices were not *dharm* not because they were backward but because *dharm* was a word properly applied to an entire *samāj* (society). Since *ādivāsīs* belonged to the Hindu *samāj*, their *dharm* was Hindu. Subgroups within the Hindu *samāj*, such as Gujaratis, Marathas, Rajasthanis, Tamils, and also *ādivāsīs*, could and did have their own peculiar traditions. These were not *dharm*; that is, they were not what was done by or expected of everyone of a certain class throughout the community; they were simply local traditions, *saṃskṛti*. On one level this position seems reasonable enough, but it led to some odd conclusions in our conversation. When *ādivāsīs* performed *pūjā* at a Hindu temple, he said, that was *dharm*. When they performed *pūjā* elsewhere, as at the *numgra* ceremony of Pāṅgu where we met and had our conversation, the very same acts were not *dharm* but simply *saṃskṛti*.

I do not want to dismiss such outsider views as cultural chauvinism, nor do I want to suggest that *ādivāsīs* and non-*ādivāsīs* inhabit two entirely separate linguistic communities. After all, *ādivāsīs* were present during my conversation with the principal. But I find it more interesting that *ādivāsīs* disagree among themselves about whether their traditional beliefs and practices constitute *dharm*. The various positions are not as simple as one might suspect.

## Surveying the *Dhārmik* Field

The majority of *ādivāsīs* whom I questioned considered *numgra* practices to be *dharm*. That was true whether I was talking with *bhaḡats* or *numgras*. For example, one *numgra* who had never been to school and who speaks no English insisted that *ādivāsī dharm* was not Hindu *dharm* and that it consisted of such celebrations as Pāṅgu, Gāmsāhī, Hoḷī (with fire-walking and

*golpheedīyo*<sup>5</sup>), Divāso, and Dīvālī. But such summary statements miss much of the complexity on the ground.

In April 2009 I surveyed 26 *ādivāsī* men, ages 16 to 70, with educational attainments ranging from no schooling whatsoever (5 persons) to master's degrees (2 persons); 6 of the 26 had finished high school, and another 9 had finished at least eighth grade. 15 (57.7 %) self-identified as *bhagats*, 11 (42.3 %) as *numgras*. The survey, which had been translated into Rāṭhvī (the local language) by friends and was administered by me orally, asked participants whether they considered various acts to be *dhārmik*, *adhārmik*, or just neutral actions (*mātra kriyā*). It included some actions, such as patricide and eating dirt, intended to ascertain whether participants really understood the task.

Clearly, this survey did not address whether participants considered *numgra* religious practices to be *dharm* or *saṃskṛti*; attempts to do that directly had proved somewhat frustrating. Rather, the survey was designed to explore the range of the *dhārmik/adhārmik* field. In other words, it more directly addressed the range of *nītidharm*, *dharm* as an overarching system of morality, than it did *dharm* as a set of religious practices, a distinction which members of local communities do in fact make. Nevertheless, the survey results are worth considering here, because they get us part of the way to where we want to go. Six of the actions that participants were asked to judge were celebrations (Dīvālī, Divāso, Gāmsāhī, Hoḷī, marriage, and Pāṅgu), one was a basic religious practice (*pūjā*), and two were moral activities that importantly distinguish *bhagats* from *numgras* (eating meat and drinking liquor [*dārū*]). Relevant results include not only the participants' judgments about the *dhārmik* character of these actions but also their identification of their own *dharm*.

There was only one act that every survey participant considered to be *dhārmik*, the festival of Hoḷī. For anyone familiar with the area the prominence of this festival should not be particularly surprising. While Hoḷī is well-known around the world as a Hindu festival, in this area it is also considered the most important *ādivāsī* festival, celebrated with rituals such as fire-walking and the performance of vows that involve, for example, male cross-dressing and smearing the body with oil and ash. As for the other celebrations mentioned, none of the *numgras* considered any of them to be *adhārmik*, but one respondent, the *numgra* with the most formal education, suggested that Dīvālī and Divāso belonged to the category of neutral actions, being neither *dhārmik* nor *adhārmik*, and that marriage might be neutral, too, depending upon the

5 *Golpheedīyo* is still performed today more or less as described in J. Haekel, "Baba Golio, A Festival among the Rathwa Koli, Gujarat", in R. Wiesinger/J. Haekel (eds.), *Contributions to the Swinging Festival in Western Central India* (Vienna: Institut für Völkerkunde, University of Vienna, 1968), 17–29.

# Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft | Vol. 4

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ISBN: 978-3-525-54017-6



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