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Acknowledgements

This work emerged from an opportunity to explore Himalayan climes and questions afforded by The New School's India China Institute. The author is grateful to audiences of earlier versions of these ideas presented in Shangri-La, Darjeeling, Gangtok, Delhi and New York, for the inspiration and conversation of Georgina Drew and Ashok Gurung, and for the helpful suggestions of two anonymous reviewers.

Resource Use Decisions: A Framework for Studying Religion and Sustainable Environments

Mark Larrimore

Analyses of everyday religion and sustainable environments in the Himalaya are not helped much by the blunt instruments of 'world religions' approaches to religion and ecology. This article suggests that a better grounded understanding, especially helpful for policy makers integrating case studies from widely varying regions, might be gained by bypassing debates about the nature of 'religion' entirely. Inspired by discussions in the Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) project, this article proposes a research framework with the deliberately mundane name *resource use decisions*.

Attending to the reasons given, in various settings and to various stakeholders, for decisions regarding the cultivation and use of resources will take us beyond unreflectively secular understandings of these terms, as well as beyond reified understandings of

'other-worldly' religion which exist more in the texts of scholars than in the everyday worlds where religion lives. Consonant with the recent turn to 'lived religion', *resource use decisions* draws attention to the religious creativity of agents at every level, lay, specialist and even other-than-human, and to the categories they employ in navigating and sustaining religious worlds. This approach better suits the ecologically, culturally and politically varied and changing Himalayan region, but also suggests ways in which Himalayan studies can contribute to broader reflection on the nature of religious practices and traditions in a pluralizing, globalizing and environmentally changing world.

Keywords: religion, environment, lived religion, resources, Himalaya.

Most disturbing was the apparent deflection of my questions about religion with responses that concerned the welfare and integrity of the community. (Ramble 2008: 13)

Introduction

The image of the Himalaya as all soaring peaks, with scant attention to what happens in the valleys and hillsides between and below, is not unlike a common way of thinking about world religions. Indeed, the two caricatures unite in the cliché of the holy man perched on a mountaintop dispensing wisdom to questioners who have left the flat world but are doomed to return to it. The truths of religion, pellucid in the pure air of sacred climes, are obscured in the valleys below—which is what drove the sage to the peaks in the first place. More grounded studies of Himalayan experience, struggling against such understandings, have long called for “retheorizing religion” for this region (Grieve 2006).

The case studies included in this special section of *HIMALAYA* offer a kindred challenge to dominant conceptions of religion. In the broader set of conversations bridging academic, policy, and activist communities and concerns from which they emerged, *Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya*, the focus on ‘everyday religion’ proved liberating. The modifier ‘everyday’ overcame misgivings many had about approaching ‘religion’ as an object of research and reflection. Questions about what could count as ‘religion’ and how to engage with it, carefully avoided at the level of theory, proved accessible and fruitful when linked to questions of practice and everyday life, leading finally to supple analyses of the interpenetration of values and practices theoretical views of religion render opaque if not unintelligible.

The current essay articulates a way of approaching religion and ecology questions inspired by these discussions. Neither embracing nor ignoring the problematic category of religion, it instead works (a little polemically) with the prosaic-seeming categories ‘resource,’ ‘use’ and ‘decision.’ It seeks to surface patterns of practice invisible to naively religious and secular accounts of environmental issues alike. After laying out the model, I relate it to the turn to ‘lived religion’ in the contemporary academic study of religion, making explicit ways it might help us get beyond the distortions generated by modern western categories of religion in general, and ‘world religions’ in particular. Familiarity with these debates isn’t necessary for use of this model, and some of the insights it offers will be old

hat to professional Himalayanists. The affinities are worth spelling out, however. These case studies can not only be brought into conversation by the model, but might also help broader discussions of ‘religion and the environment,’ ‘religion and ecology’ and ‘religion and nature’ outflank assumptions rooted in dominant views of ‘religion,’ arguably “the most ideological of western creations” (Dubuisson 2003: 147).

Resource Use Decisions

Participants in *Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya* (ERSEH) initially shied away from discussion of religion because most theories of religion, academic and popular, start with the affirmation or rejection of a supernatural, transcendent or cosmic context for human existence. The *resource use decisions* model (hereafter RUD) starts closer to the ground, calculatedly appearing banal: the everyday lives of ordinary people. Its starting assumption is that human projects of every kind require *resources*. Whatever may be claimed for other powers and entities, human beings cannot make something out of nothing. Resources are generally limited, often shared and usually require care. *Decisions* have to be made about their cultivation, employment and distribution within (and beyond) human communities. “Religion-like” practices (Taves 2012), however conceived by those who engage in and support them, are braided with other practices, sharing resources like time and space, labor and wealth.¹

At its most basic, a *resource* is a thing you can do other things with. Not much can be done without resources, including the religion-like. But it isn’t just that religion uses secular resources. Human projects of all kinds use religious resources. Waters, including variously pure or purified waters, are resources. So are the energies of mountains, the goodwill of ghosts and gods, the powers of special objects and of those specialists born with or trained in particular abilities. Ecology frameworks can facilitate the modeling of connections between components of local systems and can help clarify what is known and not known. A broad understanding of resources makes clear the extent to which resource uses are mutual and relational. The idea of resources stockpiled independently of projects, and indeed constituted as resources by this stockpiling (what Heidegger 1982: 17 called “standing reserve”) obscures these synergies and dependencies and the broader communities of human and other-than-human persons (Harvey 2005) cultivating them.

Use refers to the engagement of resources in human practices and projects. This is again a deliberately broad

definition. It is designed to draw attention to the variety of ends of human activity, a variety far exceeding the emaciated ideal of the utility-maximizing *homo economicus* (Foley 2006). People don't just act in less than economically 'rational' ways in using the resources at their disposal; significant parts of culture involve sacrifice and squander of surplus. (Georges Bataille [1992] suggests this is the heart of religion.) Employed unreflectively, the term 'use' could be a limiting term, privileging consumption over creation, cultivation and relationship, but it has the advantage of reminding us that resources *can* get used up, that human activities—including 'religious' ones—cost something. In practice the distinction between resources and uses is not easy to draw. One of the main uses is the production or reproduction of resources, and one main category of resources is human time, effort and skill in use. In tandem with thinking of resources in broad, mutual and relational ways which include the 'religious,' it may be best to think of resource uses in terms of relationships of care and reciprocity across human and other-than-human populations.

Decisions, finally, draws attention to the determinations people make—individually and as members of collectivities—about resource use in ever changing social, economic and cultural landscapes. The need for decision is not restricted to times of change, although these are the times when decisions are most self-conscious. Our attention should be directed not only to what is decided but to *how* decisions are come to, as people seek advice and precedents; cite, balance or contest authorities; seek validation from various sources; and give reasons of various kinds to various stakeholders (Schielke and Debevek 2012: 2). Resource uses affect others, so decisions about resource uses will inevitably be made in the context of relationships—not all of them, of course, harmonious. These relationships should not be understood as restricted only to living human beings. Relationships with spirits and forests can be just as messy as interpersonal human relationships and are in many ways entwined with them (Orsi 2005; Jain 2011).

The language of decision, too, must be handled with some care. Often what strikes observers as a decision is not experienced as such by those making it. There are many situations in which initiative is disowned or at least disavowed. Decisions taken by past generations congeal as custom and tradition, which may seem to have an almost superhuman authority (Bourdieu 1992); societies seem capable of "provisionally forgetting" their role in some of their own decisions (Ramble 2008: 356). Human beings also aren't the only deciders, as dreams and rituals of divination and augury make clear. Many people are excluded from decisions.

And yet resources are allocated or reallocated for old and new uses, and these changed or unchanged circumstances sometimes need to be explained to the people affected—even if it is to assert why they cannot be questioned. And of course decisions can be contested, too. Observing when and how habitual decision-making practices are upset and recalibrated can reveal how structures of authority such as expertise are recognized, challenged and reconfigured.

The *RUD* model is not exhaustive but it offers a promising template for facilitating the analysis and integration of case studies in policy contexts. The categories of *resource*, *use*, and *decision* are intended to focus attention on elements of social, ecological and symbolic systems overshadowed by bulky definitions of sacred or secular. They show that elements too often quarantined as 'religious' are engaged and active throughout these practices. Distinctions made on the ground complicate the categories commonly employed in policy discussions, showing these to be incomplete, distortive of indigenous understandings and experiences of relation and agency. By holding theories of religion at bay as it assembles fuller and more site-specific repertoires of resources, uses and decisions, the model has the potential to free policy analysis from invidious religious, as well as secular, assumptions.

Lived Religion Approaches

While inspired by the discussions around Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya, the *RUD* framework has affinities with the recent turn among religious studies scholars in the United States to what is known as 'lived religion.'² This concept is a relatively recent arrival on the academic scene, without an orthodoxy or even a dedicated journal. In part this is because it comes at the confluence of several academic disciplines. One could say that focus on 'lived religion' arose in tandem with the turn to the social in history, the turn to the cultural in sociology, and every discipline's turn to the ethnographic. It has been shaped by the discoveries and re-descriptions of women's history and 'history from below,' leavened by questions about the nature and future of religion in modern and putatively secularizing western societies, and is in turn reshaping the field of religious studies (see Orsi 2012b; Roberts 2013; Lewis 2015).

The term 'lived religion' suggests differences between religion as preached and as practiced.³ It also emphasizes that, contrary to the grim or gleeful predictions of a century's worth of secularization theorists, reports of religion's demise have been greatly exaggerated. *It's alive!*—but it lives in ways we are only belatedly coming to understand.

Indeed, the lived religion approach finds signs of vitality in the very practices and traditions which advocates as well as critics of 'religion' have tended to read as signs of decay. Let me focus on three important commitments of this approach: the interdependence of everyday and elite people and practices, the prominence of this-worldly concerns, and the syncretic *bricolage* of traditions.

First, the lived religion approach foregrounds the everyday lives of ordinary (lay) people, but is not interested exclusively in them. Unlike many studies devoted to 'popular' or 'everyday' religion, it does not imagine these to be effectively independent of the 'bigger' traditions studied by scholars of texts and institutions. Everyday practices are informed by and articulated in tension with larger institutions, discourses and power structures. The process is not necessarily adversarial. Distinctions like those between official and everyday religion are not so much false as locally constructed and contested. Where western-modeled theological or cosmic histories tell of religious traditions and institutions created from outside the human world, and certainly from outside the world of everyday life, lived religion insists on human participation: "there is ... no religion that people have not taken up in their hands" (Orsi 2003: 172). Theories positing a fundamental conflict between sacred and profane (Durkheim 1995; Eliade 1987) are abstractions of the scholar's study. The lived religion orientation finds instead that "hybridity, pastiche and 'making do' are the constitutive aspects of religion"—even in the lives of elites and specialists—and as such are "appropriate places to begin discussions of ethics and norms (Bender 2012: 274).

Second, the student of lived religion is not surprised when people engage in religion-like practices for 'this-worldly' benefit. The study of lived religion takes for granted that religious practices emerge and are maintained or modified because they answer needs—including worldly human ones. (I use terms like 'worldly,' 'this-worldly' and 'mundane' polemically.) Attentive as much to the daily work of maintaining life and relationships as to the ways religious practices are modified in response to changing circumstances, it doesn't wonder at the this-worldly aims of religious practices seeking fertility, long life and even success in business and education, rather insisting that we learn to see how these might be religion-like concerns too.

Third, the study of lived religion sees bricolage as normal and healthy.⁴ The mixing and mingling of resources, uses and decisions from many sources is not condemned as fundamentally irreverent but accepted as part of practices of creative problem-solving. Bricolage should be distin-

guished from the "lazy sobriquet of syncretism" (Ramble 2008: 215), a term implying a wide-ranging and unmotivated mashing and mangling of traditions. Bricoleurs navigate within and across traditions; they don't seek to unify let alone homogenize them. Their concern is not systematic (they generally have neither the need nor the power to construct 'a religion'); their practice in its way depends on a loose plurality of resources. The game-changer might be the move from assuming that syncretism is the deviant exception, in need of explanation and mitigation, to seeing works of what's been called "anti-syncretism"—setting-apart, purification, systematization—as the ones requiring explanation (Shaw and Stewart 1994). This change of stance will not just open non-pathologizing perspectives on the messy virtuosity of practice; it generates non-pathologizing perspectives on purity concerns, too. From a lived religion perspective we could see the setting apart of elite practices and institutions as a form of resource cultivation.

One could summarize the upshot of the lived religion orientation as seeing all people as engaged in making and remaking *worlds* (Orsi 2003, 2005). The worlds of religious people are not necessarily built in compensation, correction or refutation of the unsatisfactory world of everyday life. It is better not to assume that everyday life and religion are opposed at all. The places and people set apart in explicitly religious settings may best be understood in terms of just these ways of and reasons for setting apart, rather than supposing them effectively or ideally autonomous realms competing for souls with a fallen samsaric world. The set apart is still, of course, accessible.

'World' is a wily word worth claiming. It can lead to understandings of fragile 'worldviews' as well as to the expectation, disappointed more often than fulfilled, that people should have worked out a rationally "meaningful cosmos" (Weber 1978: 451; Berger 1990). The lived religion theorist's understanding is less intellectualistic, concerned more to assert that people of all kinds need and maintain a coherent field for their projects, an environment of interlocutors and a horizon for individual and collective striving. A world here is not an articulated awareness of the limits, conditions, origins and ends of things but something more like the opposite: a livable world is one we can, to a significant extent, take for granted as a background for endeavor or reflection. It doesn't require blind acceptance or vigilant defense against chaos, but lives in use. It might be helpful to reconceptualize the 'worlds' of 'world religions' in a similar way.

Getting Past 'Religion'

All of this may seem obvious in a Himalayanist context where Hindu polytrophy (Gellner 2005) and Mahayana understandings of conventional reality layer with older traditions in conspicuously pluralistic geological and ecological territory. However, it departs decisively from the assumptions of what is still the dominant view of religion in much of contemporary academia and beyond, a view deeply enmeshed in all the categories and structures of the modern world system, and one likely to shape non-specialists' expectations of Himalayan realities. In recent years the critique of the category of religion has virtually become a field of its own (Asad 1993, 2003; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2005; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 1997). These criticisms reveal 'religion' to reify and universalize contingent features of modern western colonial experience, but their arguments are little known beyond the academy. Lived religion-like approaches may be more effective.

The dominant view is shared by friends and foes of religion alike. It sees religion as *by definition* out-of-the-ordinary if not indeed concerned with renouncing or transcending the everyday world. It thinks of religion as a separate realm of human concern, relating generally to a separate world or plane of existence, and served by institutions which stand at best in a productive tension with the everyday world and its practices. It thinks of religion as struggling to make access to this separate world or level of experience available through practices of setting apart, asceticism, purification and sanctification. The struggle is not only with other kinds of institutions, but with the fickleness of ordinary human nature, and with the other (false, inferior, superstitious, syncretistic) systems it prefers.

This conception of religion emerged in modern times in the west but many religious studies scholars see it more specifically as 'Protestant.' It was indeed christened by the German Romantic theologian and future father of liberal Protestantism Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1799. Working on analogy with the new science of chemistry, Schleiermacher claimed to have found that religion has an 'essence' distinct from ethics and science, norms and explanations. Religion's "essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling" (Schleiermacher 1988: 103). Metaphysics, morality and religion have too often been conflated and confused, generating entirely warranted Enlightenment critiques: religion makes bad science, and impure morality. Yet the Enlighteners went too far in thinking religion itself thereby refuted. Once understood in its true nature religion is seen alone to give depth and indeed humanity to the abstract and impersonal ways of

thinking and acting of metaphysics and morals. Religion should be a "holy music" accompanying the activities of life (Schleiermacher 1988: 110), and when it strays into other areas, as it inevitably will, should be called back to itself. Schleiermacher thinks Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, unique in history in fully understanding religion's elusive nature.

Schleiermacher claimed to have 'rediscovered' the essence of religion. Scholars today are more apt to call him the 'inventor' of religion. The turn from Enlightenment to Romanticism and Empire saw the 'invention'; of many categories of which it is helpful to see religion as just one: race, complementary gender, nation and, Michel Foucault suggested, the human itself. These inventions did not come from thin air, of course. They seemed to their inventors to be discoveries because they arose from post-Reformation practices and structures already so entrenched as to seem natural. Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as a realm apart speaks to and from the world opened up by the 17th century treaties of Westphalia—separating church and state while also setting them up as parallel (Beyer 2011a, 2011b). "Methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller 2003) and what Sondra Hausner and David Gellner (2012) in response call "methodological religionism" are entwined problems.

Born of a "historical situation of religious pluralism and rivalry" (Smith 1990: 24-25), the dominant view of religion is the product of broader social, political and economic forces of which Protestantism is only one expression. It has been shared by theorists and critics of religion who are skeptics and atheists as well as by thinkers drawing from traditions in Catholic, Jewish and even Orthodox thought. Thinkers like Ludwig Feuerbach, Edward Burnett Tylor and Emile Durkheim shared with Protestantism, or perhaps with Empire, the sense that religion was a process of transcending the local, the ritual, the material—and thought it might eventually transcend itself. Much in social science theory and research on religious topics traces to categories and methods emerging from these debates. The modern view of religion—focused on individual experiences of transcendence, etc.—persists in dogmatic form even among the 'new atheists.'

The influence of the dominant view has been strong in the popular and academic study of religion, notably in the category of the 'world religions.' Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has shown how certain religions were deemed worthy of that designation in late 19th century western scholarship because of their apparent transcendence of merely 'national,' this-worldly and ritual concerns. The truest

and most transcendent religion was thought to reside in a world of radical otherness, whether in a moment of pure disembodied consciousness or an inaccessible mountain fastness. This view underlay scholars' antipathy for most forms of western religion, including Roman Catholicism, and their fascination with Indian and Buddhist traditions figured as world-rejecting or world-transcending. The apparently pluralistic 'world religions' paradigm posits and celebrates analogs to western universalism as the true heart of religion (Masuzawa 2005).

The world religions paradigm excludes much more than it includes. It does not only privilege a small number of 'great' traditions but favors only certain strands within them. It encourages us to suppose there is such a thing as an essential Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam, and to expect to find it embattled by worldly and ritualizing mediocrities, as well as restive, lazy and indiscriminate masses. In so doing this paradigm strengthens those within these traditions who try (often anachronistically) to articulate and enforce uniformity, hierarchical authority and the strongest claims for radical discontinuity with other social and cultural formations. Concerns for doctrinal purity are not new or Western, of course, but the centralizing imperatives of 'fundamentalisms' seeking an unvarying purity immune to the passage of time arguably are.

Lived religion approaches, by contrast, have no investment in the answers to questions like 'Is X Buddhist?' or 'Is Y Hindu?' if these are not questions being asked by someone on the ground. In such cases more specific and concrete things will always be at stake, and we will want to know what they are. Lived religion, and people making *resource use decisions*, don't spend time on the question 'Is X religious?' either—though its interest is piqued every time someone else asks it. In particular contexts it may be a very important question—likely triggered by legal concerns. If a context leads someone to ask one of these questions, there's a good chance more than one understanding of 'Buddhist' or 'religious' is involved, none really corresponding in general or in particular to the template of the world religions.

One can summarize the case against the dominant view by saying that 'religion,' claiming to be a descriptive category, is really a normative one (McGuire 2008). Whether used by those who want to protect 'religion' or destroy it, this view sees religion in its truest form as other-worldly, striving to represent in consistency and purity an alternative to the mundane passions and muddled compromises of human life. While apparently charmed by naïve practice, this approach systematically defers to the views of religious elites

and authorities, sharing their contempt for this-worldly concerns and their horror at perceived syncretism. It sees ordinary folks as dupes, cynics or manipulators (Latour 2010). It doesn't deny that ordinary people can integrate religion into their lives, indeed reorganize their lives in rough accordance with it, but it thinks only the initiated, those whose lives are set apart from the everyday, really understand what's at stake.

The study of lived religion is a tonic to those who wish to move beyond the dominant view. Lived religion approaches assert the humanity and creativity of all traditions and people within them. While not assuming that religion is always (or ever) a good thing, it takes seriously people's decisions about practices and the devotion of resources to them, and attends to the categories and distinctions *they* use in bringing together and setting apart the elements of their worlds. The dominant view trades in politically loaded abstractions. Lived religion approaches like *resource use decisions* direct our attention to where and how religion lives, and to how the worlds shared by human and other-than-human are sustained in practice and in time.

Conclusion

I hope I've suggested why debates in academic religious studies both matter and shouldn't detain us too long. It is not important to the project of grasping everyday religion's role in Himalayan ecologies to be able to name the traditions we are seeing, though it may matter very much how they are experienced and named by the people we are concerned with. It is also not important to be able to distinguish 'religious' from, say, 'traditional,' 'social' or 'common sense' practices, except in the surprisingly varied contexts in which these categories are being employed to explain or interrogate resource use decisions. It is not important to distinguish 'syncretism' from whatever it is contrasted with, nor to isolate practices or beliefs involving other, purer worlds than this one. Engaging the religion-like in the work, relationships and decisions of the everyday, whether of ordinary people or of religious specialists, we get a better sense of what's going on, and in terms more directly useful for policy analysis and engagement.

At the various scales where religion lives, Himalayan religious worlds prove as varied and interconnected as their natural and cultural environments. New challenges to these worlds, ecological and demographic as well as political, provide concentrated versions of issues confronting communities around the world. Resource landscapes of all kinds—natural, human and other-than-

human—are changing dramatically. Exclusivist and newly globalized versions of older religious traditions from Hinduism and Christianity to Tibetan traditions are upsetting pluralist social ecologies even as Lepcha and Bön experience a need to demand recognition as ‘religions’ after all. Widely different political systems classify, support and limit ‘religious’ practices and institutions in dramatically different ways.

Dominant views of religion, of world religions, and of the world-renouncing religions which supposedly rise above Himalayan societies illuminate little of how religion is lived or environments sustained. It is more important to be able to understand the many ways the religion-like is invoked and imagined in action than to provide a new theory. *Resource use decisions*, like other lived religion-based approaches, helps us focus on the work of constructing and sustaining worlds where embattled relationships of human and other-than-human may continue. The worlds made as people take everyday religion up in their hands offer insights for life in the valleys, hillsides, passes and peaks, and along the busily trafficked and constantly remapped routes linking them.

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Endnotes

1. ‘Religion-like’ is a deliberately question-begging term Ann Taves (2012) uses to open a space for research into the distinctions people actually make in their lives, relationships and practices. ‘Religion-like’ doesn’t name a goal or ideal, but poses a question: to what extent do we find distinctions analogous to those in the theory of religion at work in various human cultures? If ‘religion’ is to have a future as a general term for analysis it will have to be because of its kinship to clusters of ‘religion-like’ categories and distinctions in particular cases. I use ‘religion’ and ‘religion-like’ interchangeably in this essay.
2. ‘Lived religion’ and ‘everyday religion’ are both terms used in these discussions, in by turns complementary and overlapping ways. I use ‘lived religion’ as a shorthand for the larger discourse emerging from attention to what historian Robert Orsi refers to as “religion as people actually do and imagine it in the circumstances of their everyday lives” (Orsi 2005: 158).
3. In this discussion I’m focusing on English-language scholarship. David D. Hall traces the term ‘lived religion’ to the French *religion vécue* (1997: vii). In Germany the English term ‘lived religion’ is used for the study of *gelebte* as opposed to *gelehrte Religion* and bridges concerns of scholarship and religious pedagogy (Streib, Dinter and Söderblom 2008).
4. ‘Bricolage’ is a term introduced to anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) which has had a significant career in religious studies, too. See, for instance, Stout (1990), LaFleur (1994), McGuire (2008).

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