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## Response to Daniel

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## Response

James W. Laine

I want to begin my response by stating that I am very sympathetic with what I believe Professor Daniel is trying to do in his paper. That is, I am sympathetic with his program of differentiating:

- (a) ritual practice which involves “skilled players,” practiced in their gestures and comfortable in their roles, from
- (b) ritual practices presented to us as signs of articulate ideologies.

I cannot support, however, his assignation of (b) to the category of “religion,” a category he sees as Christian, or at least Christian-inspired, while (a), the subject matter of much of my courses in the Religious Studies Department here at Macalester, is assigned to some other category (or department). To do so would, among other things, put me out of a job. To situate myself as a subject, as any good post-modernist should do, it is important to confess my allegiances at the outset.

The problem of using the word “religion” as a universal, i.e., as a term referring to an essential part of all human cultures, is a problem with a certain history. In 1962, W. C. Smith, in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, traced the evolution of the term *religion* and noted the subtle ways in which the term took on very new meanings over its career, two millennia long. He also stressed the problematic ways in which the word is applied to religious phenomena in non-Western cultures.

In regard to South Asia, the Sanskritist Paul Hacker (who influenced the later work of Wilhelm Halbfass) wrote several articles tracing the way the classical Sanskrit term *dharma*, meaning order or law, came to be taken in the twentieth century as a direct translation of the English word “religion,” so that modern Indians can ask one another, “what is your *dharma*?” and get answers like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism—answers unthinkable in ancient times.

This very modern idea of “having a religion,” of belonging to an institutional body called “Christianity” or “Buddhism” in the way one belongs to a club is, in South Asia, traceable largely to the influence of Western colonials. It is not quite the same thing as communalism, which in some ways pre-dates colonialism. I have, in my own research,

found pre-colonial seventeenth-century use of terms like “the *dharma* of Muslims” to mean the Islamic religion, and even one occurrence, in a Persian text authored by a Hindu, of “the *din* of Hindus,” meaning the religion of the Hindus.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in this period, we read of Hindus converting to Islam (and re-converting to Hinduism), which implies the self-conscious decision to join the other community.

But it is important to note that that kind of religion—self-conscious, creedal, institutional — is not a term co-extensive with Christianity. There are many Christians who would have had the same sort of unselfconscious relationship to their traditions that the folk at the South Indian wedding that Daniel attended have to theirs. Mary Douglas wrote an evocative essay entitled “The Bog Irish” in which she describes the difference in Irish housewives living in England, buying fish every Friday in order to submit to the Catholic rule of Friday abstinence from eating meat, and their bishops, who, in the 1960s, did away with the rule and encouraged the moral alternative of putting a little extra in the poor box.<sup>2</sup> What the bishops saw as an empty ritual was a ritual empty of ideological content. It no longer articulated a particular doctrine about Christ’s suffering and death on Good Friday. What Douglas shows is that, although such rituals are empty of their originally intended theology, they continue to confer meaning. For the Irish immigrant to England, Friday abstinence was first and foremost a way of maintaining Catholic identity. It proclaimed: “We are not English; we are not Protestant.”

Now, had their practice of abstinence slipped out of the category “religion” and into the category of “ethnic identity?” Perhaps, if we take the theorist’s circumscribed view of religion, but these Irish women would probably not have seen it that way.

In the West, the use of the term *religion* to refer to a system of beliefs only dates from the late seventeenth century, and even then it is used more by, and for, Protestant groups than by Catholics, who clung to the idea of their “one, true faith.” Muslims, too, did not think of themselves as followers of a religion called Islam until the late nineteenth century, but rather referred to themselves as “believers.” Today, modern secularists are critical of dogmatic Christianity and its corrupt, bureaucratic organizations, and they contrast it, as a “religion,” with “the whole way of life,” which is Hinduism or Islam. Or they distinguish religion (narrow, dogmatic, institutionalized) from what they would call a *philosophy* (maybe a romanticized Daoism, Buddhism, or Deep Ecology). One often tries to avoid sully the reputation of Bud-

dhism by calling it a “philosophy” rather than that nasty thing, religion. I wonder if Daniel is doing something similar, though turning in another direction: you post-Enlightenment Christians and Christian-influenced neo-Hindus have religions (creedal, doctrinaire, institutional); in the good old days of traditional Asia, we had “culture”!

My point here is one I believe consonant with Talal Asad’s argument that the scope and meaning of religion shifts according to the culture and cultural location of the user.<sup>3</sup> Thus, I might argue that “religion is a political institution set up to enforce a common worldview and morality among a society’s members” while Schleiermacher tells us “cultured despisers” to turn from “all that is usually called religion” and “aim your attention only at these individual intimations and moods that you will find in all expressions and noble deeds of God-inspired persons.”<sup>4</sup> His critic Karl Barth wants to distinguish true evangelical Christianity from the category of *religion* because the latter he sees as the hopeless, misguided attempt of human beings to construct a system which will assure them of their beatitude — in other words, religion is always a mistake, inspired by false doctrines of salvation by works. Reliance on God’s grace has to be something other than religion.<sup>5</sup>

So, religion as a general category, or reificationist terms like “Christianity,” “Buddhism,” or “Islam,” will have a wide variety of meanings. In the interest of clarity, we can as theorists mount a kind of linguistic reform movement and call for their abandonment. But I think linguistic reforms are rarely efficacious. Religion will remain a “fuzzy” (as in “fuzzy logic”) and contested word and, if excised from our vocabularies, new fuzzy words will take its place.

W. C. Smith asks: does the word “religion” refer to personal piety (leaving aside the peculiar slipperiness of the word “piety”)?<sup>6</sup> To an ideal system? To an empirical system? To the sum of the above? The first distinguishes religion from indifference or rebellion; the second and third distinguish one religion from another; and the fourth demarcates religion from other spheres of social life, for example, art or economics. How I choose to employ this slippery term depends on the particular argument I am trying to make. Am I suspicious of institutions? Am I worried about my neighbors’ immorality? Do I want more or less religion in the public square? Depending on my agenda, I will contract or expand my definition of religion and what I deem real religion to be.

I would like to look at two examples of the process of reification, the process whereby a religiousness coterminous with general social life becomes “a religion,” a named entity referring to a doctrinal or institutional system.

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The word “*dharma*” goes through at least four stages in the transformation from its classical meaning to its present use as a translation for the English word “religion.” In Classical Sanskrit, it means law or duty, and serves to blur the distinction between a natural law (like the law of gravity) and that of social construction (like wives obeying their husbands). In this function, *dharma* affirms the brahmins’ view of the way things should naturally be.

The first challenge to this usage came in the form of heterodox movements: Jain and Buddhist. Both used the word *dharma* or its vernacular equivalent to mean “the teaching,” and, by extension, the truth their founder had discovered. In response to these challenges, conservative Hindu apologists constructed *dharma* texts, like *The Laws of Manu*, during the first centuries of the Common Era.

According to Sheldon Pollock, in response to Turkish invasions, brahmin advisors in royal courts across northern India codified a whole way of life that they felt was threatened by the intrusion of an alien Islamic civilization.<sup>7</sup> Their work, contained in encyclopedic texts called *dharma nibandhas*, may have used the word *dharma* to mean “a whole way of life,” but this way of life was now thoroughly articulated and ideological—hardly a kind of unselfconscious set of assumptions.

Only in the final stage, the period of encounter with the West, is the word *dharma* colored by the influence of Western (and especially Protestant Christian) notions about “religion.” This is the period in which Daniel is interested, and he is correct in seeing it as a period in which people in South Asia become self-conscious users of the word “religion” and the word(s) they chose for its translation, thus producing through this new discourse new social formations, indeed, “religions” themselves. Paul Hacker made a similar observation when he contrasted such social formations as Neo-Hinduism and differentiated them from what he called Classical Hinduism.<sup>8</sup>

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There is a big difference between the localized, unselfconscious worship of deities (*kami*) in Japan, and the adoption of a Chinese name for these traditions (*shen tao*>Shinto) and its systematic theology. The Nara Period (eighth century) texts, *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, took popular deities and used them in Chinese-influenced, official, and nationalist mythologies, thus beginning the history of state-sponsored religion in Japan, a process which, with various ebbs and flows, continued up until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ideologization of Shinto as a national cult under Motoori Norinaga (died, 1801) was a precursor to the sort of twentieth century attempts made to distinguish Shinto from “religion” because, in ways opposite to Daniel’s suggestion, “religion” for these thinkers does not refer to their carefully crafted national ideology of Japanese identity. The well-known differentiation between Shrine Shinto, promoted by the state as a non-religious mark of Japanese identity and patriotism, and Sect Shinto, specific sectarian groups called *kyokai* (church), may have been Japanese responses to European styles of reflection on religion, but the tendency to organize religion from the national capital had cultural antecedents going back to Prince Shotoku and the first Japanese contacts with China.

But in the sense Daniel has proposed, Shinto becomes a religion, just as, I would argue, Hinduism does, not simply as a reaction to Christian influence, but already in reaction to earlier experiences of pluralism. Hinduism begins to be a creed in opposition to Buddhism, leading to the writing of encyclopedic compendia of orthodox law, a process intensified in the encounter with the Islamic world. In Japan, the “religion” of Shinto is born out of Chinese contact in the sixth to eighth centuries, and reborn in the encounter with the West. Also, in Japan, there continues to be some fluidity in the use of terms to describe religion or religions; for example Buddhism, Shugendo, and Shinto are “ways” (*dao, do, to*), whereas New Religions are “sects” (*shu-kyo*), the latter connoting a greater degree of exclusivity and reification.

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I want to conclude, then, that the impulse to systematize, abstract, reify, and institutionalize, is not unique to Christianity, and is not the essential element in “religion.” This impulse seems to occur in places

of cross-cultural encounter, where there is a confusion of norms. This self-consciousness was described well by Herbert Fingarette in his rather Wittgensteinian perspective on Confucian etiquette. If a person from a handshaking culture greets a person from a bowing culture then the ingrained choreography of greeting is lost and they become clumsy, unsettled, and self-conscious.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, people at a Hindu wedding in New Jersey are not skilled performers in a well-choreographed rite. They are self-conscious, awkward, and feel compelled to explain meanings. Presumably, British missionaries felt the same way. But is this Christian? I think the same two patterns can be found there, as well. In discussing Christian notions of ritual, Talal Asad asks: "How did the idea of teaching the body to develop 'virtues' through material means come to be displaced by the idea of separating internal feelings and thoughts called 'emotions' from social forms/formulas/formalities?"<sup>10</sup> How did Christian rituals move from a kind of dance, learned and cultivated to produce virtues and dispositions, to symbolic codes expressing doctrinal meanings learned elsewhere? Asad's analysis, in short, suggests that Christian rites have not always been burdened by what Daniel calls the "surfeit of mind."

Daniel says a non-believing Christian would be a strange creature, indeed. But would she? For Mary Douglas's Bog Irish, I doubt belief is a major concern. For them, the strange creature would be a Protestant Irishman, who had adopted a set of beliefs. The word "Christian," in a thoroughly Christian culture, can come to be nothing more than a synonym for "human being," as one discovers in the etymology of cretin from the French word *chrétien*. Christian can mean "civilized person," as the Southern racist uses it in the phrase "a Christian and a white man." For most of the British serving in India, heartfelt proclamations of their beliefs was not what they had in mind when they upheld the virtues of Christian civilization. To be a Christian, then, can mean many things, for example:

1. to be a civilized person (in Europe)
2. to be a member of a Christian caste (in India)
3. to be a member of a church
4. to have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ.

In modern America, when I hear a professional football player say "I am a Christian," I know that he means (4) a deep personal relationship to Jesus, which I might find disconcerting even though I might be (3) a

church member. Good Catholics wince when confronted on street corners with the question, "Are you a Christian?" (Not *that* kind!) We distinguish these meanings of *religion* or *Christianity* by context because they are family-resemblance terms, and their fuzziness is inherent to their usefulness. The context will determine the scope one applies to such a term as *religion* . . . and we will all continue to argue about the proper width of that scope.

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## Notes

1. James W. Laine, "The *Dharma* of Islam and the *Din* of Hinduism: Hindus and Muslims in the Age of Shivaji," *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, forthcoming.
2. Mary Douglas, "The Bog Irish," *Natural Symbols*, 37–53.
3. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 27–29.
4. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 92.
5. R. J. Erler and R. Marquard, eds., *A Karl Barth Reader*, 28–31.
6. W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 47–48.
7. Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism: Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 98–106.
8. Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, 580–608.
9. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—the Secular as Sacred*, 9–15.
10. Asad, 72.

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