

EDITORIAL

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Editorial Introduction

Leonard Norman Primiano

Correspondence:
primiano@cabrini.edu
Department of Religious Studies,
Cabrini University, Radnor,
Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

This special issue of the *International Journal for Dharma Studies* emerges from the 2014 meetings of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, California. Antoinette DeNapoli, the editor of these articles, organized that panel through the AAR's Comparative Studies in Religion Section and with the specific theme: "Religion at the Crossroads: Experimentation, Innovation, and Change in Hinduisms and Buddhisms as Practiced in Contemporary Asia." I would like to bear record that the papers on that morning were given by Antoinette DeNapoli, June McDaniel, Jessica Starling, and John Nelson, with John Hawley offering a response.

Introduction

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I presided over the panel as Chair. I was particularly delighted that my official responsibilities for the occasion made certain that I was present to hear the papers because the papers were both theoretically valuable and out of my regional and disciplinary-specific subject areas. It was good to return to religion in Asia again after many years. While I had studied with the Indologist and Sanskritist Wilhelm Halbfass as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, and even taken classes in Tibetan language, I moved away from studying Asian religion and philosophy by my third year in college. Awash in the incredibly rich and diverse Humanities courses that were offered at Penn at that time, I turned my attention to Western culture inspired by the study of folkloristics, American folklore, American religion, and specifically American "folk religion" studying in college and graduate school with the father of the American folklife studies movement, Don Yoder (Primiano 2010, 2017). While I might have been out of my regional comfort zone chairing a contemporary Asian religion panel, I was, as an ethnographic folklorist who studies religion, quite familiar methodologically with their foundation in contemporary ethnography.

And, of course, the core of the panel and these present articles on the creativity, interpretation, experimentation, innovation, and change expressed in the lived religiosity of contemporary religion complements my own interests concerning what I have identified as “vernacular religion” (Primiano 1995), or “religion as it is lived, as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44). While I have specifically worked on contemporary vernacular Christianity throughout the world and particularly within the United States, the papers assembled in this present collection of religion in Asia and in the Asian diaspora are a marvelous opportunity to reflect on religion in everyday life as a theme in religious studies.

An encounter with these perspectives on twenty-first century experimental *Dharmas* caused me to recall an older work that nurtured this direction in the study of religion. The estimable 1979 collection edited by Pieter H. Vrijhof and Jacques Waardenburg, *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies* treated issues of “lived religion” within Christianity as well as in chapters on Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and religion in China and Japan and Africa. While the two-tiered nature of their conceptual understanding of religion as “official” and “popular” has been a specific cause for criticism (See Primiano 1993), the daring of their contributors attempting diachronic considerations of these themes, as well as suggestions for future “empirical” research in the various world settings, was trailblazing and quite influential to me. In a closing chapter of that volume, P. H. Vrijhof offered a noteworthy challenge to researchers over 35 years ago: “Scientifically we know very little of the ways in which popular religion functions, what intentions play a role in it, and how it rises and declines under various conditions.... Concepts and interpretations of religion and religiosity must arise from the lived reality of religion itself” (1979: 695–696). What the present set of articles provides through their ethnographic and theoretically-minded orientations is a response to Vrijhof: studies which probe the way vernacular religion develops, its influences, its expressions, its relationship to traditional religion, its innovations in response to the new societal changes or as John Nelson observes: new “opportunities and challenges.” Nelson in his study of experimental Buddhism in Japan emphasizing Buddhist Temple death rituals and customs suggests a careful study of religion in a method akin to my own suggested methodology. He breaks down the process of individual religious innovation to acts of testing, applying, assessing, and retooling “practices and understanding into new systems of meaning and self-definition.” (Nelson)

I have often made note, since the publication of my definition of “vernacular religion” and subsequent reflection (Primiano 2012) that it can refer to religion in both historical and contemporary perspectives. In the spirit of Carlo Ginzburg’s classic study of the religious life of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, *The Cheese and the Worms* (2013), I still feel that the process of religion is not restricted to post-modernity. The suggestion, however, that the “individual” has taken on active qualities of personal and community creation in terms of religious belief and practice unique to the conditions of social, cultural, and political changes of the twenty-first century is an intriguing way to approach both contemporary religion and the study of religion in general.

Reading these essays has caused me to think about vernacular religion as a useful term for the consideration of twenty-first century religion in the East and the West and the myriad ways that religions are transformed within their own traditions or are compounded with other traditions. Of course, each era or epoch brings with them

cultural and social events to which adherents of religious traditions must respond. I have been studying the religious expressive culture of such a response for the last 25 years in the case of the twentieth-century (and still living) American indigenous religion known as “Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement.” In this celibate communitarian intentional religion, there exists a synthesis of 1) Eastern religious thought filtered through American Transcendentalism and the “New Thought” Movement; 2) the personal religious experiences of the African American minister, the Rev. M. J. Divine better known as Father Divine, which included, according to historian Jill Watts (1995) American Catholicism, the urban black church, Pentecostalism, and Methodism; 3) the harsh realities of race culture in post-Civil War and Jim Crow America which nurtured a yearning for racial justice. In the twentieth-century, among the largely African American adherents of the Peace Mission in cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Newark, Jersey City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, social experimentation involving integrated living, empowered economics, and female self-actualization prompted vibrant individual and community creativity and generated fresh transformative expressions of religion within everyday spheres of life. In the case of the Peace Mission, I have highlighted those changes by examining their expressive culture of song traditions, vernacular architecture, and foodways (See Primiano 2004; 2009; 2014).

As I have been working on this introduction on Asian Dharma traditions at the crossroads of post-modernity, I encountered in a fieldwork interview, an example of what I see as Asian American belief systems at a diasporic crossroads of religious borders and reminiscent of the work of Gregory D. Alles and Purushottama Bilimoria in this special issue. Bilimoria examines how the nature of religion has changed for Hindus and Sikhs who have departed India for the United States and Australia. He carefully outlines the context of transnationalism and globalization and the place of their old religions “in the search of a stable identity elsewhere” as they open to ways of other being. In their new domestic sites, religion increasingly becomes a cultural resource and not the traditional social institution. Individualized ritual experimentation associated with temple and domestic rituals or domestic religious material culture, for example, is influencing the transmission of their respective *dharma*s within their own communities. It is the movement of the people, the three phases of which Bilimoria describes as “diaspoetics,” which mark the experience of identity dislocation, fluidity, and creative reconfiguration of the South Asians whom he has studied. Some individuals find themselves in a spiritual diaspoetics, if you will, crossing borders of caste or Hindu orthodoxy, while others “remain liminally in the borderzone.”

It is a border zone of ritual non-sacred space that Gregory Alles offers in his article indicating a useful complement to traditional and recent understanding of sacred space in Religious Studies. Studying ritual among the Rathvas, a community of *adivasis*, in western India, Alles sees natural and human-constructed borders and entrances and walls “as a locus of creative activity in their own right,” and the construction of borders in order to breach them...as a fundamental dynamic of Rathva rituals.” In an example of a form of vernacular mysticism, the Rathvas are expressing their own special understanding of ritualizing at physical or existential borderlands “without having a clear, clean, conceptually coherent account of the worlds that sit on either side of the border.”

As mentioned above, I see religious liminality and border exploration in the experience of a Chinese American émigré whom I recently interviewed concerning his religious life.

In his initial years in the United States, living in South Carolina, he converted from no belief in a deity – as he was given no religious training in China – to Evangelical Christianity. With a family to nurture and with pressing economic needs, he then made the decision to establish a business practicing acupuncture, an alternative form of healing and key component of traditional Chinese medicine. Having learned acupuncture in China under the current Communist regime, no religious foundations in Taoism or Buddhism or other older traditional beliefs were applied to the techniques that he was taught. What he faced in his decision to become an acupuncturist was a fascinating cultural multiple-edged sword. Acupuncture is understood as being associated with Asian religion and spiritual paths of energy in the body. While recognizing this popular understanding of the religious origins of acupuncture in America, he stated to me that he personally believed otherwise. Because he felt that acupuncture had no religious or spiritual foundation, he determined to vernacularize acupuncture according to his own beliefs: he began to pray as a Christian for his patients and saw acupuncture as an expression of that prayer and his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, he also faced the concerned interpretations of his Christian Evangelical congregants that what he was practicing was an illicit form of religion with its basis in Buddhism and Taoism and not Christian healing. Standing in the existential borderlands of his own personal needs for economic survival, a strong Christian belief system rooted in community, and understanding rooted in his own experience of Chinese medicine, he re-created the spiritual meaning of acupuncture to meet his own immediate religious and economic survival needs. He is not merely a practitioner of a traditional Asian medical art, he is a Christian healer who has tested, applied, assessed, and retooled his “practices and understanding into new systems of meaning and self-definition.” My consultant’s negotiation of religion in America is a manifestation of what I call “religious idioculture,” that intimate and careful religious world building in which individuals engage as a part of their everyday vernacular religious lives. Though drawn from the context of American religion, I would like to cite it as a complement to these thoughtful case studies, and as an introduction to John Nelson’s thoughtful explanation of “experimental religion,” which has stimulated me to reflect generally on the complex crossroads of religious life in the twenty-first century anywhere in the world. It is so important to appreciate “the sequence of decisions and steps” in which people create and re-create their religion and, of course, I see a strong kinship between my hermeneutic of “vernacular religion” and Nelson’s “experimental religion.”

The folklorist Henry Glassie (1995) has written that tradition is: “the creation of the future out of the past” and history, “an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future” (395). When it comes to religion, John Nelson has perhaps a complementary, but less sanguine view of tradition and history in light of twenty-first century technological, economic, and political changes. It takes human agency to make “historically, inspiring, but static blueprints into creative resources” that an experimental approach to Buddhism can “shape into meaningful and somewhat profound, applications.” As the theoretical spine of this special issue, Nelson shows how *dharma* experimentation – in his case observed in various ritual innovations found in Japanese Buddhist temples especially involving death practices, innovative musical performance, and Buddhist-inspired activism can be systematically broken down into

a five-point guide for clearer understanding of how history, tradition, and post-modernity work together. He cites: 1) positioning; 2) agency; 3) negotiation; 4) rationalism rooted in everyday life; 5) continual reinvention. In a crowded sacred and secular marketplace, religious experimentation is bound to continue to both positive and negative ends.

Jessica Starling's article, complementing Nelson's ethnographic work within Japanese Buddhism, is centered on an issue that is central to the study of religion as it is lived and that is the vernacular religion of those who are considered "leaders" of religious institutions. Older conceptions of "folk religion" often represented the practice of religious leaders as devoid of "experimentation," which, of course, offers a lack of empirical reality as to how everyone is vernacular in their religious belief and practice (See Primiano 1995). Starling notes that the model of experimentation in her fieldwork in the Shin Buddhist tradition and the introduction of a modern understanding of "the discourse of individual rights" has been most visibly expressed by the central Buddhist institutions, especially in this case study by male leaders of Temples – no longer restricted to celibacy – and their wives. Starling does not stop there. Her fieldwork also examines the local level of expression of modern ideas of the individual and associated rights. She elucidates a "top-down" experimental model in this context where Temple wives at the periphery of Buddhist life existing with and accept the influence of centrally expressed modern values, not without some stated questioning, synthesized with their own traditional community and family understandings of what it means to be an authentic Buddhist. Starling's article dovetails well with June McDaniel's study of a form of Hinduism – Agama Hindu Dharma – developed by Hindu intellectuals and elites in Indonesia, "a land of compromise, in religion and also in politics." Here is religion lived and woven into theology, ritual, and the arts of the Hindu community, while also "adopted into state policy." Again we are reminded that experimental religion can be the result of creative influences from the top down and found among all social classes. This article observes religious experimentation in a Muslim majority country by the Hindu minority for very practical purposes: for the sake of survival, for the sake of compromise, for the sake of religious innovation and interfaith cooperative interaction, and for the sake of peace.

In my own research into how the religious center is expanded by vernacular religious movements – my doctoral dissertation on vernacular religiosity was a case study of the Roman Catholic gay and lesbian affinity group known as Dignity – I have worked on how "populations who are normally marginalized in orthodox...practices" (Howard) experiment with religious traditions to create their own unique artistic hybrid of belief and practice in their lives. Veena Howard's work on the modern movement of Santmat in the rural area of northern India and the creation of a "Vernacular Vedic Dharma" by monastics of great appeal to their contemporary followers is a wonderful complement to my own study of how spiritual leaders and everyday believers can "experiment" to make a relevant and resourceful religious community meeting spiritual and everyday needs. Santmat, Howard explains, defines itself as "widening the circle" of religious authenticity and conventional identity, naturally placing themselves and their practice within that widening understanding. Sensitive to the construction of a single "canopy" of parallel religiosities, monks as spiritual leaders guide followers to the value of personal experience of this vernacular Vedic *dharma*. They "valorize the vernacular" and see their interpretation as a spiritual path and not as a de-centered sect of Hinduism.

Complementing this discussion of the valorization of the vernacular, Antoinette DeNapoli's ethnographic work is centered on the "theologizing of technology" by Hindu *sadhus* who have adapted twenty-first century new media technology such as mobile phones, smart phones, personal computers, tablet computers, and iPads into their lives, belief, and practice. DeNapoli asks the question how renouncers justify from their religious worldviews the use of these material devices and technologies, which seem to be drawing the attention of humanity away from the serious experiences of the divine that is the object of their devotion. DeNapoli carefully accounts for the vibrant creativity used by individual *sadhus* "to negotiate the conventional parameters of Hinduism(s) and experiment with what *dharm* and *sannyas* mean" in the context of the transnational twenty-first century. The artful engagement of tradition with the technological fruits of post-modernism have been evocative for scholars of American religion as well. Robert Glenn Howard's *Digital Jesus* (2011) is a case in point, an ethnography of the development of leaderless online fundamentalist Christian communities characterized by a focused existential anxiety for prophesized apocalypse. While DeNapoli does not see the development of a virtual renouncer-form of Hinduism as a result of her *sadhus* acceptance of technology since the time of 2011, she does note that "crafting continuity between technology and *dharm*," the *sadhus* artfully "infuse new meaning" into core Hindu religious beliefs, such as that of renunciation (*sannyas*).

The articles in this special issue move the discussion to how the influences of post-modern life have led to individual creative changes made by believers and communities of believers transforming lived dimensions of religious traditions. I have been excited to see the discussion of everyday, lived, experimental, and vernacular religion moving to the center of the contemporary study of religion. All of the different genres of religious studies seem revitalized by such consideration. I would like to end my introduction with what I see as a very post-modern coda and natural outcome of a move towards the respectful consideration of vernacular religion no matter from which culture or region: the irrational in religion or what I call in my definition of vernacular religion, "the ultimate object of religious belief" (1995:44). For me, the most radical dimension of my definition of vernacular religion has been the inclusion of this idea since most non-confessional studies of religion keep it completely separated. They often deny it altogether. That would appear to be a very post-Enlightenment/modern approach. My concern has been to leave "religion" in the religion being studied. A simple truth of a folkloristic approach to the study of religion is that you have to believe the believers and to believe the believers you have to accept the category of the object of belief that they hold. When doing religious ethnography, as these present articles show, it is not respectful to believers to disconnect the subject that is most important to them and to disallow the reality of belief and experience connected to belief in their lives. Such an approach prevents scholars from making religion itself absurd, irrational, meaningless, and without value.

Religious belief has traditionally been concerned with dimensions of reality not proven rationally. It is about emotional categories of thought held in heart strongly, but not necessarily a part of the rational realm. They can be given rational supports, but the core of belief is non-rational, not irrational. It has more to do with emotion and intuition and non-rational categories of thinking and experiencing than rationality, and it forms people's boundaries about who they are, how they engage with the world, why they marry, their family structure, how they decorate their homes and modes of

transportation, how they spend their time, etc. The contemporary believers/practitioners highlighted in these articles deeply engage belief in an irrational ultimate object. So the question is, are all of these articles concerned with the way post-modernity has changed these individuals' perceptions of this ultimate object or has it changed for them the ultimate object itself? How further religious experimentation will take on this issue will undoubtedly be a hallmark of postmodern religious studies inquiry.

Competing interests

The author declares that he does not have competing interests.

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