In search of metatheoretical reflexivity type theories of religion: The parochialism of religious studies lies in its global outlook.

Globalization & parochialism

The last decennia globalization has become an important topic in religious studies. The argument has been made that paying attention to religion in its globalizing context will help religious studies to shed its parochial, ethnocentric character. One of the first to do so explicitly was Ninian Smart. For most of human history, he wrote, people had only limited, rudimentary ideas about their own and other peoples’ beliefs and were imprisoned in a culture or religious belief system from within which they looked at others, dismissing their faiths and feelings as heretical, deviant, ignorant and antisocial. But times have changed, the modern study of religion started in the West but has opened up the entire sweep of religious experience, through comparative research, historical inquiry and more detached and sensitive exploration. It has gone far beyond its Western origins, it is becoming global.

The context of globalization not only facilitates such a global study of religion but has theoretical implications for such a study as well. First, it allowed Ninian Smart to take the first developments in the critical study of the concept ‘religion’ as a Western notion seriously while nevertheless going beyond it by stating that “globalization had turned things around.” That is, terms such as Buddhism or Hinduism, but also religion, though these had sprung from western minds, now were used by those who partook in these traditions in their movement towards a religion becoming aware of itself. Second, globalization makes it very clear that if there is a western inclination that needed to be done away with, it was the distinction between religion and secular ideologies. We now need a ‘global approach’, he claimed, without a sharp line between religion and non-religion. In the current globalizing context, such a strict delineation of the subject matter, a left-over from a specific Western ideology, is no longer realistic and cuts out what is most interesting. That is, inherent in cultural interfaces, he writes, are possibilities of new forms ‘betwixt and between’.
In short, for Ninian Smart globalization forces us out of our narrow, parochial conceptions.

From mono-metastructural type to Metatheoretical reflexivity type

In a previous article though I characterized Smart’s work on religion and globalization as still a mono-metastructural type of theory. Such type of theory sees globalization mainly as modernity pursued at a more accelerated pace. However, Eduardo Mendieta distinguishes two other types of theories on globalization: the Matrix Rearrangement and Differentiation type and the Meta-theoretical Reflexivity type of theory. The first type differs from the mono-metastructural type of theory by theorizing globalization as a radically new order. It recognizes the first form as ethnocentric and responds to it with an integrationist perspective. The fundamental building blocks of social interaction enter into radically new relations, resulting in new subsystems, which in turn change the meanings of the building blocks. In these theories space is opened up for interesting reflections, such as Roland Robertson’s view that modernity is to be seen as a consequence of globalization, in stead of the other way around. The third type is integrationist as well, but is characterized by a deepened reflection on the categories and concepts used in theorizing globalization. The latter is thus above all seen as a conceptual and theoretical challenge. As Mendieta puts it, the challenge here is to rethink planetary unity and to think society anew. System theorist Niklas Luhmann is an important figure here.

Against the background of this typology, Peter Beyer’s work on religions in global society, grounded in both Roland Robertson’s and Niklas Luhman’s work can be seen as promising. He argues for a dialogical perspective that questions one-dimensionality, emphasizes heterogeneity and glocalization as constitutive of globalization, while recognizing that the latter is not a totalizing development, but is socially incomplete, not only discontinuous but also in continuity with what went before. His work is an example of a study of religion that simultaneously involves reflection on society and on how global society reflects on itself. Such focus allows him to take up a rather different position in discussions concerning the concept of religion. In a way, his position is quite similar to Ninian Smart. He agrees with Fitzgerald, as Smart agreed with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that the modern concept of religion is not easily applicable to previous times since it implies a reification that confuses and distorts. More than Smart, Beyer also accepts the critical reflection that “ideas of religion and religions have ideological and political
implications, that they have arisen and played important roles in the context of Western imperial expansion, serving as tools of colonial projection and control” (Beyer 2006:62) Nevertheless, he concludes:

Upon close inspection, what becomes relatively clear from all these critiques is that the problem these scholars see is mostly with the assumption that religion is a differentiable and independent something – W.C. Smith’s reification, McCutcheon speaks of religion *sui generis* – which is independent of the consciousnesses of its human carriers or of wider social structures and processes and can therefore be defined or studied in its own right. Without the claim to social differentiation, their critiques lose much of their force and indeed their target… The critiques claim that religion *is* not a differentiated domain; but on closer inspection, they come much closer to saying that it *should* not be one, or simply that it is not everywhere and has not always been one. (Beyer 2006:63)

However, like Smart, Beyer is saying that globalization turns things around and that if there were no religions previously, there are now.

The analysis I am presenting here offers a way through these controversies by accepting their cogency in one respect but denying it in another: differentiated religion is a relatively recent ‘invention’ and is thoroughly implicated in the historical developments that have brought about today’s global society, ‘warts and all’… Scientifically speaking, there is indeed ‘data’ for religion in this differentiated sense. (Beyer 2006:63)

There is nevertheless a difference between Smart’s and Beyer’s views. Smart sees a quite natural evolution from “grouptied religion” to “a” religion, and further to a universalized, preferably critically self-aware religion due to confrontation with modernity and missionizing religions such as Christianity. Beyer on the other hand clearly agrees with Mendieta that differentiated religion is invented in a rather contingent process that allowed modernity to constitute its identity vis-à-vis the religious as what it left behind or as what it had transformed and sublimated to give rise to a new order. He also recognizes that the appearance of the notion of globalization signaled an awareness that the cardinal points that oriented the modern self-reflections and self-thematization of society had fundamentally been rearranged. Modernity appeared as multiple and the notion of globalization not only allowed the particularity of modernization to come to the fore but also indicated the awareness of a new singularity: one world, whose direction was no longer determined by one part of that world. (Beyer 2006:21-22) In other words, in the latter perspective it becomes necessary to ‘denaturalize’ modernity and understand the divisions it draws between religion and secularity, between the local and the universal as divisions within it. Briefly, Mendieta’s version of such denaturalization is this: The exploration travels and the discovery of the Americas allowed humans to think the world
as a whole from the perspective of a unified planet, a self-contained sphere, not because God looks at it but through human activity and accomplishment. (Mendieta 2001:54). Able to see the world as a unity of human activity, the discovery of the social as such was possible (Mendieta 2001:54) and religion could now be seen as one of the subsystems of human interaction (Mendieta 2001:55).

Seeing the globe as one, nevertheless comes with an important shift in the way humans see themselves, a shift that will take us towards relativization. “Interestingly,” Mendieta notes, “at the moment that the world is presented as a unity, as a planetary totality, human cultures are relativized.” (Mendieta 2001:54) At this moment, perspectives become local, (Mendieta 2001:54). Only humanity as such can make claims of universality, no culture can claim a privileged point of view. Thinking modernity, society, religion and planetary unity anew, then, demands a recognition that our parochialism might not be some narrowness left over from the past, but a myopia fed by a quite specific universal and global outlook. That is, the concepts and categories we use might rather be part of modernity and globalization and thus not only, part of what is to be explained, but also in some sense ‘true’ to us. Mendieta’s reflections led him to conclude that “the degree to which a particular analysis of planetary integration dispenses with or incorporates a conceptual reflection on the “religious” should be taken partly as a litmus test of its appropriateness for the global age (Mendieta 2001:47). In my view, this can be rephrased for theories of religion: the degree to which a particular reflection on the “religious” and on the concept of religion dispenses or incorporates a reflection on the “globalizing” and on the concepts of globe and global indicates the appropriateness of the theory for this global age. In other words, religion theories should strive to be of the second order, metatheoretical reflexive type, reflecting not only on the concept of ‘religion’, but participating in the endeavor to think ‘planetary unity’ anew, simultaneously theorizing our old ways of doing so, recognizing how a myopic and distortive global perspective was catalyst for as well as part and parcel of globalization.

We have left the ground

Reflection on the notion of the globe and more particularly on the global outlook is at the center of anthropologist Tim Ingold’s work. The nucleus of his concerns is that “with the world imaged as a globe, far from coming into being in and through a life process, it figures as an entity that is, as it were, presented to or confronted by life.”(Ingold 2000:210) Ironically, one could say, thinking planetary unity involved a slicing up, a
divide, a thinking in two. This global outlook on world and life has been built into western thought and science that tries to comprehend the continuity of the living world by taking ourselves out of it. “It appears that the world as it really exists can only be witnessed by leaving it, and indeed much scientific energy and resources have been devoted to turn such an imaginative flight into an achieved actuality.” (Ingold 2000:211)

However, the specific nature, the efforts, costs and materials that go into such exercises of detachment are ‘pushed into the wings’. The detached position is generalized in theories about human beings (social theories, theories of religion…). But even more, this global outlook has been made ‘true’ in a certain sense and incomplete, not only by acquainting each schoolchild with the globe, but in more fundamental ways by remodeling our environment into a globe’s surface so as to allow us a groundless existence, first for the elite, but now more and more ‘democratized’ (Szerszynski & Urry). As a consequence, our parochialism or myopia, that is, our global outlook, is not simply a matter of unfinished rational business to be neutralized by further thinking and pure mental labor, but is embodied and involves an attunement to quite a specific environment.

It is impossible to do justice to Ingold’s work in a few pages. But I’ll try to do three things: first, I very briefly point out the particular nature of the globe and the cartographic map, then I discuss how this affects theory and possibly relates to the issue of reification and last I discuss how we have to some extent left the ground by turning our environment into a globe’s surface and dividing ourselves into a body and mind.

Seeing the world as globe and the globe as one involves the exchange of a perspective from being in the world to living on a continuous and centreless surface overlaid with a social reality of our making. More importantly, it involves a unifying spatial framework, cartographic in nature, that gives the impression of non-indexicality. Like maps, it involves the idea that a person equipped with knowledge of this kind ought, in principle, to be able to figure out just how the world should look from any selected point of observation. However, the idea of non-indexicality ignores on the one hand that maps, such as sketch maps, native maps etc. do not index locations but index movement, like a trace, involving thus not a local but a regional perspective. On the other hand it connects the cartographic map to the dream of the Bird’s eye view turning what is a construction, an abstraction, an arrangement of markings that relates to spatial “reality” only by agreement, not by sensory testability, into a ‘representation of reality’, thus fuelling the speculist assumption that true knowledge is to be had by looking at the world. In other words, cartography, responsible for the production of globes, turns a regional perspective into a global one by pushing movement into the wings, reifying itself into a representation of space. (De Certeau) Where the sketch map remains a fleeting element
in a more important process, the cartographic map in itself becomes all important. Latour characterizes it as an immutable mobile, to be multiplied and distributed. In short, there is a gradual movement from remembering to representation, from movements finding traces on paper to mobile maps containing knowledge. The globe, thought as one through exploration travels and cartography, and seen as the theater of life involves the same shift.

In theorizing human beings and society such a shift is present as a logic of inversion, turning differences of kind into differences of degree and vice versa. The very essence of the global outlook is to be found in the Kantian traveler, journeying across the globe in search of new experiences to fit into his overall conception… He journeys upon its outer surface and it is at this surface, the interface between world and mind, sensation and cognition, that all knowledge is constituted. …Planet Earth consists of pure substance, physical matter, presenting an opaque and impenetrable surface of literal reality upon which form and meaning are overlain by the human mind.(2000:213) Knowledge is then seen as a matter of cognitive reconstruction, not by engaging directly, in a practical way, with the objects in one’s surroundings, but rather by learning to represent them, in the mind, in the form of a map… The world becomes a tabula rasa for the inscription of human history.

In such a ‘global’ perspective the difference between local and global perspectives is one of degree. However, a more grounded regional perspective allows Ingold to see the difference between ‘local’ and ‘global’ perspective not as one of hierarchical degree, in scale of comprehensiveness, but one of kind. In other words, the local is not a more limited or narrowly focused apprehension than the global, it is one that rests on an altogether different mode of apprehension – one based on practical, perceptual engagement with components of a world that is inhabited or dwelt-in. As such local or regional perspectives are infinite. This does not mean however that they are in any sense incomplete, or that they represent no more than fragments of a total picture. It is only when we come to represent local differences in terms of a globalizing discourse that a logic of inversion becomes involved transforming the centre from which each perspective is taken into a boundary within which every local view is seen to be constrained. The idea that the ‘little community’ remains confined within its limited horizons from which ‘we’ – globally conscious Westerners – have escaped (remember Smart) results from a privileging of the global ontology of detachment over the local ontology of engagement.

A logic of inversion reifies. Relationality is ignored, movement is pushed into the wings while traces are turned into things-in-themselves, representing reality or expressing something else through lines of correspondence. Looking from outside life, taking a global perspective, a relational reality is turned into for instance religion as a
phenomenon that people have and use. Traditions become understood as systems of belief in stead of condensed histories. However, such reification is not simply a matter of problematic theorizing. As both Ninian Smart and Peter Beyer point out, there is ‘data for religion in such a differentiated, reified sense.’ Here as well, Ingold’s reflections can be of further interest. In short, the groundlessness of the global perspective has been made ‘true’ in a certain sense.

In “Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet” Ingold talks about the groundlessness of metropolitan life. That groundlessness, he writes, is not only embedded in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology and biology but in western social structures as well. ”(Ingold 2004:315) To make his case, he discusses the striding gait of boot-clad Europeans, the practice of destination-oriented travel, the use of shoes and chairs, the valorization of the upright posture and pavements. “Could not”, he wonders, “the technology of the footwear be understood, …in some measure, as an effort to convert the imagined superiority of hands over feet, corresponding respectively to intelligence and instinct, or to reason and nature, into an experienced reality?”(Ingold 2004:321) He sees the mechanization of footwork as “part and parcel of a wider suite of changes that accompanied the onset of modernity… all of which conspired to lend practical and experiential weight to an imagined separation between the activities of the mind at rest and a body in transit, between cognition and locomotion, and between the space of social and cultural life and the ground upon which that life is materially enacted”(Ingold 2004:321).

“The boot and the chair establish a technological foundation for the separation of thought from action and of mind from body – that is for the fundamental groundlessness so characteristic of modern metropolitan dwelling. It is as though, for inhabitants of the metropolis, the world of their thoughts, their dreams and their relations with others floats like a mirage above the road they tread in their actual material life. A famous anthropological statement to this effect comes from Clifford Geertz. ‘Man’ he has declared, “is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.’ I think we should perhaps amend this statement, to say that only booted and seated man, artificially insulated – whether in movement or at rest – from direct contact with the ground, would consider himself so suspended”(Ingold 2004:323).

These changes accompanying the onset of modernity, must also have accompanied the ‘invention’ of religion, differentiated and to some extent reified. On the one hand, one can see a gradual shift from remembering to representation, from trace or intermediary to mediator or immutable mobile in our understanding and practice of writing and reading, both important elements of the Christian practice (Michel de Certeau, Paul Griffiths, Ivan Illich). On the other hand, the imagined separation between religion and
politics, between religion and the secular, formulated by John Locke and others when reflecting from a global perspective on and at the same time, ‘inventing’ society as a contract between ‘naked’ individuals with body and mind, must have been given practical and experiential weight in multiple ways. In that sense, one can indeed say that there is (at least) data for religion in a differentiated sense and it needs to be studied from a grounded perspective that pays attention to all the movement, materials, costs and efforts that go into ungrounding ourselves through a division in a mind that looks at the globe and a body going from point to point on the globe, a division that only seems possible when religion is clearly differentiated from politics, both from science, all from economics etc.

**Bibliography**

Beyer, Peter  

Ingold, Tim  

Mendieta, Eduardo  

Smart, Ninian  