

His contention that the “Hobbit” suffered from pathological conditions is significantly better supported. The cranial volume is abnormal for any hominin, the type specimen’s skull is distinctively asymmetric, and its “archaic” features are typical of various pathologies. It is also true that the Hobbit camp was from the beginning inadequately familiar with Asian pygmy remains of both the Pleistocene and Holocene. Henneberg is much better informed but, ironically, even he has not, it appears, heard of research that shows there are other “Hobbit” populations to be found, with much the same characteristics as the controversial Liang Bua specimen. Lee R. Berger, a South African, excavated with his team Ucheliungs and Omedokel Caves (Chelechola Orrak) on the Rock Islands of Palau, where at least ten burial caves are known, finding the remains of dozens of tiny human skeletons. They are about the same size as the first Flores specimen, with adult body weight estimated as low as 28 kg, and they exhibit the same traits often interpreted as primitive. These include reduction of the absolute size of the face, pronounced supraorbital tori, non-projecting chins, relative megadontia, expansion of the occlusal surface of the premolars, rotation of teeth within the maxilla and mandible, and dental agenesis. The brain size is not as low as that of the first Flores specimen but resembles that of *H. erectus*. The Palauan pygmies are said to date from between 2,900 and 1,400 years ago, and the recent objections by Fitzpatrick et al. (2008) are self-contradictory in that they both support and reject the notion of island dwarfing in humans. Berger’s team has no hesitation defining the Palauan small-bodied people as fully modern *H. sapiens sapiens*, subjected to rapid reduction in body and craniofacial size through Laron Syndrome (Hershkovitz et al. 2007). This condition yields even lower body heights in adult females than that of the “Hobbit” (which apparently was between 1.06 and 1.35 m, i.e., not quite as low as Morwood et al. claim).

The Flores controversy documented in these two volumes demonstrates that palaeoanthropology and, by implication, Pleistocene archaeology remain epistemologically unsound disciplines. Morwood’s “*Homo floresiensis*” has been variously defined as a gibbon-like creature (by Gert van den Bergh), dwarf *H. erectus*, as deriving from *H. dmanisi* or *H. habilis*, as an Asian australopithecine and as a modern human with genetic defects. Any intelligent person can see that it is a primate, and if the discipline of palaeoanthropology cannot resolve such a basic issue, it has not learnt much since those remains from the Kleine Feldhofer Cave were presented. If we compare this with the incredible de-

velopments in such fields as plate tectonics, ethology, or genetics, in just the last fifty years, it becomes clear that there are fundamental structural problems here. The Flores controversy is the archaeological equivalent of still arguing whether the Sun or the Earth rotates around the other.

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Indigenous Religions

A Review Essay

Armin W. Geertz

James L. Cox is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He is a well-known scholar in the field of study of African religions, focusing on African Christianity, especially in Zimbabwe. He has also pursued research on the religions of Native Arctic Peoples in Alaska. He has actively worked closely with indigenous scholars to develop academic networks for conferences, student and staff exchange, and publications in Africa.

“From Primitive to Indigenous,”¹ which is published in the *Vitality of Indigenous Religions* series edited by Graham Harvey, addresses a problem faced by all scholars of indigenous religions. By what name do we categorize the cultures and religions of indigenous peoples? Most university departments of religion have courses on the major world religions. But courses on Indigenous Religions are squeezed into the category of “Primal Religions,” “Nature Religions,” “Pre-literature Religions,” and even, at some universities, “Primitive Religions” (not only in the West but also in India and Asian countries). Research publications and theoretical discussions in the comparative study of religion also use such terms. These terms are, however, burdened with the ideological baggage of “primitivism.” Even though we as scholars traffic in such categories all the time, the crux of the matter with this particular classificatory exercise is that it is quite often the romping place for colonial stereotypes, racism, and civilizational preening. A recent volume on primitivism edited by Jacob K. Olupona has addressed this issue from various perspectives, and Cox refers to several of the contributions in that volume.² A growing number of publications on primitivism in the study of different cultural areas have also appeared during the past decade.

At the same time, however, there is a justified need to maintain the legitimacy and necessity of working with a category of non-Western peoples and cultures who do not subscribe to the major world religions. Why? Because 1) their cultures and religions have for better or worse played an exceptionally central role in the development of methodologies and theories in a wide variety of academic disciplines, 2) their cultures and religions deserve study and comparative reflection in their own right, and 3) they are constantly under dangerous pressure from dominant societies, industries, and interest groups who do not care about multicultural heritage, and thus the importance of sustained intellectual interest in them.

Against this backdrop, faced as I say by all of us, James Cox wishes to radically rethink the category in question. The term “indigenous religions,” which he subscribes to, is relatively neutral and is also used by indigenous scholars themselves. But

what kinds of problems need to be resolved and revised? The short answer was formulated by Jacob Olupona in the above-mentioned book: “while the ‘world’ religious traditions of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are amply studied and represented in the academy, the study of ‘indigenous’ religions is speciously cut off from religious studies” (2004: xiv). Cox uses this observation as a starting point for critically analyzing the history of studying and teaching “indigenous religions” as distinct from “world religions.” He argues that the term “Indigenous Religions,” although acceptable, is still highly problematic because it attempts to classify widely different religions, cultures, and worldviews into one category. The case study approach which most scholars use is one way of dealing with the problem, but there is a continual tension between the category and the people being studied. This is of course not unusual. This is the way conceptualization works. It is simultaneously revealing and restricting. What, for instance, is Christianity? Or Buddhism? Recent theoretical discussions have clearly pointed to the inadequacy of our conceptions. But what is the alternative? The alternative is a complete disintegration into disparate disciplines with no common reference at all. That alternative leads to particularism and ideographic research resulting quite often, as our research histories have unequivocally shown, in the proliferation of naive and absurd theories about religion, and a whole series of other topics. Another alternative is the celebration of religious ideologies and worldviews in dialogical methodology. This alternative, however, leads to religious reproduction. It further confuses or obliterates the difference between studying religion and practicing religion. Furthermore, this approach is not necessarily true to its sources.

This book (Cox 2007) analyzes the underlying assumptions and development of research on Indigenous Religions in chapter 1 (9–31) and the essentialist assumptions behind the category “World Religions” (chapter 2; 33–52). Then Cox focuses exclusively on two concepts: “Indigenous” (chapter 3; 53–74) and “Religion” (chapter 4; 75–93). The resulting clarified concept “Indigenous Religions” is then tested on two cases: the Yupit of Alaska (chapter 5; 95–117) and the Korekore in Zimbabwe (chapter 6; 119–139). Cox argues that the term survived the tests and moves on (chapter 7; 141–167) to a detailed discussion of the term in relation to the debate on primitivism between myself, the Dutch scholar of African religions Jan Platvoet, and the editor of the series in which

1 Cox, James L.: *From Primitive to Indigenous. The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 194 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-5569-5. Price: £ 50.00

2 *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. London 2004.

the book under review is published, the British scholar Graham Harvey. Harvey has written on a wide range of topics from Judaism to Paganism, Satanism, Animism, Shamanism, and Indigenous Religions. The book ends with a brief “Afterword” (169–171) that sketches out undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Indigenous Religions.

After a critical discussion of prior British research, including his home university at Edinburgh, Cox discusses the intrinsic essentialism associated with the term “World Religions” used by scholars of comparative religion and theology (e.g., Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Ninian Smart). He then draws on the groundbreaking work of Jonathan Z. Smith conducted during the 1970s and 1980s on this tendency and then, in a more detailed way, on the work of Tomoko Masuzawa.³ The point of this discussion is, using Masuzawa’s phrase, that the category “World Religions” is intended primarily “to distinguish the West from the rest” (2005: 2 f.).

Cox writes that “the re-configuration of ‘primitive’ religions first into ‘primal’ religions and then into ‘indigenous’ . . . suffers from the very same political and essentialist errors inherent in the world religions paradigm” (52). Therefore he critically examines the use of the term in the literature and develops a scientific definition of “indigenous.” After discussing definitions and characterizations presented by Jan Platvoet and Graham Harvey, Cox introduces his minimum definition of the term that outlines what he not only regards as the major characteristic of Indigenous Religions but also as the “one central belief found among indigenous societies everywhere,” namely that Indigenous “refers to its being bound to a location; participants in the religion are native to a place . . . The single and overriding belief shared amongst Indigenous Religions derives from a kinship-based worldview in which attention is directed towards ancestor spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice” (69).

One could counter that kinship-based worldviews are also found in other religions (for instance in China and Japan) and that reducing Indigenous Religions to one central belief is hazardous. Cox’s minimum definition, however, does not imply that this is the only common feature of Indigenous Religions. There are a huge variety of other fac-

tors, but these, Cox argues, are shared by virtually all other religions.

Cox moves on with a deconstruction of the “world religions” essentialist definition of the term “religion.” Drawing on some of the contributions in Platvoet and Molendijk’s anthology “The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts, and Contests” (1999) and on French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s “Religion as a Chain of Memory” (2000), Cox defines religion as referring “to identifiable communities that base their beliefs and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable realities on a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively from generation to generation” (85). This socio-cultural definition avoids theological essentialist definitions. Whether it breaks new ground, as he claims, in how we conceive and study religion is another question. My own work on the definition of religion comes very close to Cox’s definition. I identified similar properties because, like Cox, I assume religion to be a cultural and social institution (1999: 445–475).

Cox brings his two theoretical discussions to a well-formulated summary: “[W]e will delineate the study of Indigenous Religions as those identifiable communities whose traditions relate to the place to which they belong and whose authority is derived from the chain of memory traceable to ancestors. The beliefs and experiences of these identifiable communities refer to postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities, which are connected to the locality to which the people belong and are related integrally to ancestral traditions. The study of the religions of indigenous societies, unlike other religions, is restricted by definition to authoritative traditions about non-falsifiable alternate realities connected specifically to particular locations and kinship lines, but it also includes the ways such religions have changed under the forces of colonialism and globalization, which have forced them to accommodate to competing world views” (89).

Cox concludes the chapter with a programmatic conclusion: “The study of Indigenous Religions on this line of thinking belongs in university departments of religious studies, as a theoretical problem for the study of religions, as instances of specific, localized kinship-based religions, as ways in which globalized religions influence and have been influenced by local religions, and as cases that address and illuminate rationally, empirically, and specifically pre-formulated research questions” (92).

These are matters to which I ascribe. The empirical “tests” of his definition in his two case studies are more descriptions than tests which illustrate

³ The Invention of World Religions or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism. Chicago 2005.

that his definition of Indigenous Religions establishes parameters “around the category without positing a universal content for what fits into the classification” (117).

By far the most interesting chapter is the final one (chapter 7) in which Cox systematizes the criticisms of implicit primitivist thought in current religious studies raised by me and Jan Platvoet, and compares these criticisms to the work of Graham Harvey and Cox’s own work. Briefly, I criticized tendencies in American religious studies (for instance Mircea Eliade) and in American popular culture (for instance neo-shamanism) as a new primitivism. I argue that the new primitivism, like the old one, is harmful on two counts: 1) it provides us with skewed mirror-images of ourselves and not of the people we claim to describe, and 2) it causes us to meet local indigenes with stereotypical and romanticized assumptions that real, living indigenes cannot possibly live up to. Positive primitivism, I argued:

“... keeps real indigenous peoples out of the picture just as effectively as the scientific racism of the nineteenth century! The way out of this must surely lie in developing approaches that are not intrinsically associated with primitivist notions (in the positive sense) of values lost in some mythical past and/or only found in indigenous or archaic cultures. The answer must also be found outside the realm of religious doctrine, mainly because most religions, including indigenous ones, are implacably primitivistic (about themselves in the positive sense and about others in the negative sense). I suggest that a way to move beyond primitivism is not along the path of intuitive empathy, creative hermeneutics, the misunderstood interplay of mutually absolute discourses, or misanthropic ecological ideologies, but rather through a radical revitalization of the Enlightenment project” (Geertz 2004: 62).

Similar arguments are found in Aidan Campbell’s book on African primitivism, which Cox also discusses (Campbell 1997). Jan Platvoet picked up on my arguments and wrote a vigorous attack in the *Bulletin* of the African Association for the Study of Religions (Platvoet 2004), in a review of three of Graham Harvey’s collections: “Indigenous Religions. A Companion” (2000a), “Indigenous Religious Musics” (2000b), and “Readings in Indigenous Religions” (2002). Platvoet argued that Harvey’s work is partisan and primitivistic. Harvey denied his partisanship in the next issue of the *Bulletin* (2004) but argued that my call for critical rationality is not the only methodology appropriate to academic research. He argues

that the Cartesian version of modernity is nothing more than “a Western/European tribal view of and approach to the world” (2004: 38).

I do not think that “Cartesian-phobia” is a sufficient counterargument against pursuing rational, theoretically-informed, empirical research on Indigenous cultures and religions. There are dualisms and dualistic conceptions throughout world history and in all parts of the world, including many Indigenous Religions. That science may also have dualistic assumptions is no devastating criticism (many scientists, by the way, are monists). Objectivism is also a human universal. People objectivize all the time. By objectivizing the world, we extend our minds into the material world and use various objects to offload an overburdened working memory and to allow us to objectively view things. We objectivize concepts, relations, illusions, scenarios, and insights so that we can share them with other people, and they can share them with others. All what we do is somehow related to our involvement in social networks that thrive on the objectivation of common values, ideas, and feelings. A further validation of the term “objective” is *to be objective* in various situations. This is not a particularly Western concept either. People all over the world use various methodologies to check and double-check other people’s claims. Some of these methodologies are clearly objective in a scientific sense, e.g., asking witnesses for their accounts or checking things out first hand. Other methodologies are not objective in a scientific sense, but are so in a symbolic sense, e.g., divination systems, visionary pronouncements, and so on.

What we must keep in mind is to be vigilant and reflective towards our methodologies and to remember that especially scholars pursuing fieldwork must realize that we are a part of the subject/object under study. A holistic methodology, on the other hand, I think is an illusion, even for those scholars who celebrate religious and ethnic worldviews. Life is too complex to be holistically reproduced in oral and written discourse. What scientists (in the humanities and social and natural sciences) attempt to do is to produce accounts of the world that are as close to the mark as humanly possible through the use of diverse methodologies and theoretical clarity which allow others to test their claims.

Cox argues that Platvoet’s criticism of Harvey was too harsh. But he concludes that Harvey’s work is clearly an animist theology even though it is not primitivistic. The animist theological approach is one that privileges the insider point of

view and is thus part of the phenomenological tradition in religious studies. And, Cox writes, it is consistent with new trends in religious studies (161). I do not sympathize with such trends, nor does Cox, who writes: “Harvey’s approach, however, does raise the persistent problem associated with phenomenology that by giving priority to the perspective of believers, the scholar goes beyond engaging in dialogue for academic purposes and instead becomes an advocate for the beliefs and practices of religious communities. If this is done unreflectively, it becomes evangelism. If it entails analysis and critical reflection, it is indistinguishable from theology” (161 f.).

Cox concludes that Harvey’s work is fully academic, but that it is undertaken to promote the animist cause “in opposition to what he regards as the distortion of reality foisted on the world by dualistic thinking, which severs mind from matter and distinguishes not only organic from inorganic substances, but sees personhood as resident only within humans” (162). Harvey is also an animist social activist, much along the line of theologies of liberation or feminism.

This is an interesting and challenging book. I sympathize with Cox’s approach, and even though he may not have solved the conceptual and methodological problems in the study of Indigenous Religions (who can claim to have done so anyway?), he has nevertheless produced a valuable contribution to our subject by presenting recent discussions and research on these issues. Even though the decades of anthro-bashing are over, and many inspiring and collaborative projects are developing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, we still need to contend with the stereotypes, romantizations, and primitivisms of some scholars in the study of religion and in the anthropology of religion. I concluded pessimistically

in 2004 that I do not think we are capable of moving beyond primitivism. I hope to be proven wrong.

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