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Jan G. Platvoet
Leiden University

From Before to Beyond the One Yardstick: On the Canonical Phase in the General History of Religions

Introduction

Within the limited space of this article, a research tool is developed for the comparative study of canonization and de-canonization in the history of the religions of humankind.¹ The important place these processes occupy in the history of religions is highlighted from the perspective of the comparative study of religions. I first discuss whether and how the history of the formation of the Christian canon may be of use for developing research tools for investigating similar processes in other religions. I will indicate both the usefulness of such instruments and their inherent limitations. I then discuss ‘scriptocentrism’ which has been the standard approach, as a matter of course, in all research of canons so far. I discuss the limitations this scriptocentric approach entails. I explain also the consequences which the rise of canonical religion had for pre- and sub-canonical religion. I then propose some analytical tools useful for comparing the various attitudes towards canons that believers in different religions entertain. And I develop a few more research tools for mapping the distribution of canons over time and space. Finally, I place canonical religion in a comprehensive framework by contrasting it to pre-, sub-, and post-canonical religion. I sketch the distinct traits and positions of each in the long-term history of human religions. Lastly, even though canonical religions are still manifestly and even dominantly present in the current phase of human-kind’s religious history, I argue that they are in their late autumn bloom. For they were produced over the past three millennia by tiny literate elites residing by their training in reading, writing and reflection at the centers of knowledge, power, prestige and wealth. Their privileges have recently been dispersed gradually over ever larger parts of human societies and are thereby democratized. As a result, the seeds from which canons flourished for two millennia have become, however paradoxical that metaphor may be, the ‘seeds of their destruction’ through the ever-wider dispersion of prosperity, health, wealth, and literacy and recent communication revolutions, at first in ‘the West’, and more recently globally.

¹ I thank Karel van der Toorn and Gerard Wiegiers for their remarks on earlier versions of this article.

'Canon': a Western-Christian concept

The Greek < *ho kanoon* > is a Semitic loanword that is found in Hebrew as < *qaneh* > and in Assyrian as < *qanû* >. Those languages, as well as Ugaritic, Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic and modern Hebrew, have borrowed it from Sumerian, which is a non-Semitic language in which it appears as < *gi* > and < *gi-na* >. Everywhere, the first meaning is 'reed'. The further semantic field in Greek includes two important meanings for our analysis. The first is that of a 'yardstick', or 'standard length', and by extension 'standard', 'norm', or 'measure' for numerous items.² The second is that of a 'standard list', or 'standard catalogue', of, e.g., measures, rules, laws, documents or books.³ These two, 'norm' and 'list', constitute the two sets of meaning in the early Christian concept of 'canon', especially in the Greek churches, and a double and ambiguous use of 'canon'. It referred either to a text that served as a *regula fidei* (*kanoon tès pisteos*) with respect to correct doctrine, or as *regula veritatis* (*kanoon tès alè-theias*) of the correct liturgy; or it referred to a separate ecclesiastical ordinance. In addition, it also acquired the meaning of the fixed and closed list of biblical scriptures that came to be called 'the books' (*ta biblia*) which as a collection were regarded as the *kanoon ekklesiastikos* (*regula ecclesiae*), and as the norm of Christian orthodoxy, to which no book should be added nor from which none should be subtracted.⁴

Canonicity in the first sense refers to the authority, ranging from great to absolute, that certain Christians attached to a text for determining what content does, or does not, belong to 'the faith'. This form of attribution of authority occurs already in the letters of Paul.⁵ The earliest traces of canonicity in the second meaning can be found from the second century onwards, when Irenaeus contrasts Marcion with 'the New Testament' as an authoritative group of Christian scriptures alongside the 'Old Testament'. However, this list was not definitively established and closed until around 450 CE (common era).⁶

Certain aspects and phases of the historical Christian canonization process can be abstracted and developed into analytical tools for research of similar phenomena in other religions even when they did not know the notion of 'canon'. With the help of such tools, one can investigate, for example, whether there was, or is, also 'canon formation' in those religions in either or both meanings, how these have developed, and by what similar or different traits those processes are marked.

Though such a comparative study is of limited value only (cf. below), it is still important for two reasons. One is that it broadens our general knowledge of the process of absolute authority attribution in the religious history of humankind. It may provide answers to research questions such as: where, when and in which variants of a religion does such authority attribution occur, or not occur, or no longer occur? And especially, in what contextual extra-religious contexts do they occur or no longer occur? With what effects for these religions

² E.g., not only for how to speak a language, perform music, qualify beauty, build living spaces, execute a peculiar trade, calculate a calendar, speak eloquently, develop a logical argument, but also for setting the standard in law, ethics, religion, sainthood, theology, etc.

³ Cf. Sheppard 1987: 62-63; Smith 1993: 246-247, 264-266

⁴ Cf. Sheppard 1987: 63-67; cf. Also Fernhout 1994: 2-3, 51, 59-60; Smith 1993: 93, 284

⁵ Cf. Sheppard 1987: 63; Fernhout 1994: 18-19

⁶ Cf. Sheppard 1987: 63; Leipoldt & Morentz 1953: 8, 40, 43, 47-51. W.C. Smith (1993: 13), however, points out that the earliest official church documents establishing which scriptures precisely are part of the canon date from the 16th and 17th centuries.

and their societies? And lastly, when non-canonical and canonical religions co-exist in a society, as they often do, how do they relate to each other, and shape each other, towards canonization as well towards de-canonization?

Secondly, those broader views and different research directions can then be used as new analytical tools to re-examine the early Christian process of canon formation. They may provide significantly deeper, broader, and/or more nuanced views from those based solely on the traditional scriptocentric study of canon formation in early Christianity. In addition, these broader insights are useful for investigating the history of Christian canon formation since its 'closure' in the 5th century CE, for the establishment of the canon as a collection was not the conclusion of the Christian canon history, but the beginning of a long history.⁷ For that canon history continues as long as believers attribute absolute, or some other authority to a particular text or collection of texts, synchronously e.g., because of the significant differences in authority attribution,⁸ and/or diachronically because of the different ways a canon has functioned in the history of authority attribution to that canon.

Two obvious examples of the latter are the invention of book print in the mid-15th century and subsequent marketing of < *ta biblia* > in one volume which fused 'the books' into the one 'Bible' as the unified 'Word of God', as also did Reformed *sola scriptura* theologies.⁹ The other is early 20th century USA Christian 'fundamentalism': the radical response of the 'Bible Belt' in southern USA to 19th century Darwinian evolutionism, liberal Christian academic theology and its critical study of the Bible as primarily a historical collection of books. Radically rejecting these liberal views of the unified 'Word of God', self-styled Christian fundamentalists proclaimed the literal truth of the Bible from cover to cover as 'fundamental' to [their] Christian faith. 'Fundamentalism' has since become a common concept and tool in science of religions for the analysis of radical responses in numerous societies to unwelcome changes.¹⁰

However, unless 'canon' and other Western conceptual tools are applied critically in the research of non-Western religions, well-founded objections can be raised against them as well as against the application of their results to Western Christianity. I can best demonstrate this with Michael Pye's intervention at a conference on methodology in Turku, Finland, in 1973. He said: if you borrow the term 'canon' from Western Christianity to investigate similar processes in other religions, you subject them to an instrument that contains alien elements that are 'absolutely inapplicable' to those other religions.¹¹ This procedure will produce 'knowledge' of other religions that has not been stripped of specific Western views and research goals. To illustrate the outcome, Pye turned the case around. Suppose that more or less parallel concepts that play a central role in 'canonization' processes in other religions, such as *dharma* and *sutra* in Indian religions, *Ching* in Chinese, and *kyō* in Japanese religions, are transformed by Indian, Chinese and/or Japanese scholars of the comparative study of religions into analytical instruments for study of Western canonical religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism. That research, Pye argued, would yield very different results

⁷ Cf. Fernhout 1994: 204-205

⁸ 'Reformed' Christians generally adopted more outspoken views of 'the Bible' as 'Word of God' than Roman Catholics and Eastern-orthodox Christians.

⁹ Cf. W.C. Smith 1993: 13-14, 246, 268-269

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Marty & Scott Appleby 1991, 1993, 1994

¹¹ Quoted in Honko 1979: 32. Cf. also W.C. Smith 1993: 235-237

from those we are achieving with instruments derived from the history of the Christian religion.¹²

Michael Pye is right. We must recognize that as Western scholars of religions we contribute first and foremost, and perhaps exclusively, to Western scholarship of religions. Our History of Religions is our appropriation of other religions, our broadening of our horizons, and at the same time, and often not without a veiled imperialism, our attempt to present our knowledge as valid and normative for historians in other cultures and societies as well.¹³ We need to recognize that our science of religions is thoroughly constrained and permeated by our Western culture. Only by being aware of and recognizing this cultural bind can we strive after greater objectivity in our scholarship of other religions. To the extent that we succeed in broadening our inevitably Western appropriations of other religions by (further) stripping our comparative research instruments of their specifically Western origins and research goals and tailor them to the 'alien' religions researched, will we grant other religions conceptually more leeway and permit them to manifest themselves in their time-and-again different cultural idiosyncratic singularities. To the measure that we broaden our minds and concepts, we begin to contribute to an intercultural study of religions that may be valid also for scholars from other cultures and religions, and in which they can participate without fundamental reservations.

Scriptocentrism

Canonization research is, many scholars would say, by its very nature, scriptocentric by being fixed and focused on scriptures and Scripture. From the point of view of a representative study of religions, covering all religions equally well and equally neutral, however, a scriptocentric methodology contains many shortcomings, even when it is restricted to the investigation of Western processes of canonization and de-canonization. By their very nature canonical scriptures restrict the kind of religion investigated, the epochs scrutinized, as well as the types of believers whose religion one studies, and research tools with which one investigates their religions. Let me explain.

The core discipline of the academic study of religions is History of Religions. By this I mean the descriptive historical study of single religions¹³ of societies with as well as without the art of writing and scriptures. However, since its inception in the 19th century, History of Religions has very much been a philological enterprise investigating religions as expressed in scriptures and in other written documents. As a result, the part oral traditions played in religions with scriptures went unnoticed as were the numerous other ways in which believers of canonical religions also expressed their beliefs, e.g. in ritual and other religiously inspired behavior, in the design of temples and landscape, in dress and body language, in iconography, etc.

This preoccupation with scriptures in historical research on canons was primarily due to written sources on canonical religion(s) being abundant, and information on the other modalities of these religions being sparse or nil. But it was also due to an ingrained attitude among historians of religions. They were pre-eminently inclined to scriptocentric research by their modern academic training in philosophy and science, and by doctrinal Christianity serving as

¹² Quoted in Honko 1979, 32. Cf. also W.C. Smith 1993: 235-237 in respect of the Western notion of '[Sacred] Scripture'.

¹³ On that concept and its history and pragmatics, cf. Platvoet 1999a, 1999b

their model of ‘a religion’: a ‘rationally’ and hierarchically ordered system of belief notions about the meta-empirical and its ‘revelations’. That predisposed them to eagerly, and often exclusively, trace the belief notions of scriptural religions in order develop for them similar well-ordered systems of belief notions after the modern Western-Christian model of a ‘religion’.¹⁴

However, by studying only the scriptures produced by the tiny literate elites of canonizing societies,¹⁵ and their canonical religions, the numerically much larger folk religions of the illiterate parts of those societies either went unnoticed or, worse, were distorted by contemptuous judgmental misrepresentations and usually dismissed either as ignorant superstition or as (evil) magic. I will come back to that later.

This preoccupation of scriptocentric research with the well-ordered religions of the tiny literate elites of societies with the earliest canons also resulted in a focus on the ‘Axial Age’, the period in which most of these scriptures were produced that recorded the teaching of the charismatic founders and began soon to systematize faith into doctrine.¹⁶

As a result, five important fields of research were, and are, in danger of falling by the wayside. First, the kinds of religion that are radically different from canonical orthodoxy based on texts that an elite held to be metaphysically true and ethically normative and therefore to be imposed as such on everyone else. By contrasting canonical religion with the very different kinds of religion that preceded it, were practiced simultaneously with canonical religions, and after its demise, the peculiar historical character of canonical religions is much better grasped. This means that one must investigate, e.g., what ‘religion’ was/is in societies in which the arts of writing and reading were, or are, completely absent, as well as literacy and the peculiar mental modes which literacy produces. In preliterate societies, a canon, and a canonical religion, could therefore never have been developed.

In addition, we need to study which religions were, or are, practiced in a society in addition to its canonical religion, and how they were practiced. Whether they were banished as demonic, covertly tolerated, permitted in some pastoral embrace, or accepted as para-religions of equal status. I will detail these modes of co-existence below.

And finally, we need to study how canonical religions are developing in the most recent and current periods of the history of the religions of humankind, which can truly be termed post-canonical, even though canonical religions are still vigorous and new canonical religions are still emerging, as I will explain below. This will lay bare how canonical religions are faring in post-canonical times.

Secondly, written canonicity should be compared with oral and aural canonicity, that of mouth and ear. It is necessary to investigate how written canons relate to canons that were

¹⁴ Cf. Hexham 1991: 370-371

¹⁵ Or more precisely, that part of the elite that had mastered the arts of writing and reading. The military nobility often had no or very limited mastery of reading and writing.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers (1949: 18-25, 98-106) coined the notion ‘Axial Age’. He restricted this ‘hinge time’ explicitly to the period between the 8th and 3rd century BCE (Jaspers 1949: 19). I expand it, from 1000 BCE to 700 CE. And unlike Jaspers, who regards the Axial Age as a unique event in the history of humankind, I regard it as the First Axial Age which is currently being reduplicated by the Second Axial Age, from 1415 CE to now, a period that produces even faster and deeper changes in the general history of religions than did the First Axial Age (Cf. Platvoet 1993: 236; and its English version, *The Revenge of the ‘Primitives’*, in <https://jangplatvoet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/TheRevengeofthePrimitives-2.pdf>]: 10, 13-15, 19-22

or are, as textual corpora, primarily, or even exclusively meant to be recited and proclaimed in a liturgy before a congregation that hears it and responds to its recitation. These oral/aural canons were therefore intended for the trinity of mouth, ear and eye, and not for only the eye in silent reading, and certainly not for reading them closely in private, or for understanding their teaching. Some oral/aural canons were passed on to successive generations of ‘reciters’ only orally through daily memorization routines. As was and is the case, e.g., in Muslim *madrassas* in non-Arab speaking Muslim countries in which children have for centuries been taught to learn the Qur’ân by heart without translation and exegesis, and therefore without grasping the meaning of the *soeras* recited.

Oral/aural canons therefore did not end up in the library of the theologian as books for reading but were performed ritually only, or depicted in ritual dance with resounding singing, or as a dramatic epic in a liturgy, or as spoken prayer, or were murmured as sacrificial formula in sacrifices. This means that we need to study how canonical scriptures relate to canonical recitation¹⁷ and to canonical liturgy in the general history of religion.¹⁸ This also means that the ‘evident assumption’ must be revised that canon formation is intrinsically linked to the development of the art of writing in the history of religions and therefore occurs only in societies with writing, and in the ‘religions of the book’.¹⁹

Thirdly, ‘canons’, passed on as formally and permanently fixed text corpora, whether as scriptures or in liturgical recitation, need to be compared with a very different but still kindred kind of ‘canons’ that do not consist at all, or not yet, of fixed text corpora. For example, there are ‘canons’ in certain religions and for certain believers that are incarnated in a person: a rabbi, a guru, a Zen master, a Hindu, Sufi or Christian saint, Krishnamurti (unwillingly), and other living or dead persons: e.g. the Buddha, the Christ, the Prophet. They embody the supernatural for their followers to such an extent that their words, or even their silence, are for them *regula fidei*, the absolute measure of their faith. If these, often still fluid texts are memorized by their disciples, or written down, or, in modern time, ‘published’ in print or digitally in social media, some may develop into proper canons, as happened in the case of Zarathustra, the Buddha, the Christ, the Prophet, Guru Nanak, Joseph Smith, and many other ‘founders’ of a historical religion with a canonical scripture.

Fourthly, closed ‘canons’, with their sharp distinction between their absolute authority and the subsidiary authority granted to other religious texts,²⁰ need to be compared with ‘canonical’ traditions that are (still) relatively or entirely open, e.g., that of Mahayana Buddhism. Its canon has been expanded for a long time, and the attribution of authority to its texts is still fluid and diverse rather than absolute and uniform (and contested).²¹

¹⁷ Cf. Graham 1987a: *passim*, esp. 58-80; 1987b: 138-139. Qur’ân means ‘recitation’ (Graham 1987a: 96sq.; 1987b: 138; Adams 1987: 159-160). Cf. also Smith 1993: 7-9. Leipoldt & Morenz (1953: 17-18) assert that two factors were decisive in Christian canonization: apostostolic origin and recitation in liturgy.

¹⁸ Cf. Graham 1987a: *passim*, esp. 58-80; 1987b: 138-139. Qur’ân means ‘recitation’ (Graham 1987a: 96sq.; 1987b: 138; Adams 1987: 159-160). Cf. also Smith 1993: 7-9. Leipoldt & Morenz (1953: 17-18) assert that two factors were decisive in Christian canonization: apostostolic origin and recitation in liturgy.

¹⁹ Cf. Dundas 1992: 52. *Pace* Goody: ‘It was only with alphabetic writing that some religions decisively broke through their national frontiers to become religions of conversion’ (Goody 1986: 3, *passim*). Cf. also Leipoldt & Morenz (1953: 11-14) on why no formation of canons occurred in Egypt and Greece despite writing and reading being developed in them at a high level.

²⁰ Zie Fernhout 1994: *passim*

²¹ Cf. Graham 1987b: 134

Fifth, and finally, a canonical religion, even if it reigns supreme in society, is never the sole religion in a society. Almost always most 'common' believers practice a religion that is openly or covertly more or less profoundly different from the normative orthodoxy of the religious elite that takes a canon as standard. I term this often barely visible religion of 'common people', the 'infra-', 'intra-', 'para-', or 'sub-canonical' religion of societies with a canonical religion. I will give instances of these varieties below.

Below, I highlight these five fields of research: the varieties of scriptural, oral, person-embodied, and closed and open canonical religion. And I compare them with pre-, post-, and sub-canonical religion.

Believers and normative texts

In the comparative historical analysis of canonical religions at least two issues need to be studied. One is the various ways in which the faithful of different 'canonical religions' relate to the scriptures to which they attribute normative authority. Another respects several aspects of those texts themselves, and in particular their distribution in time and space. Historically, of course, these two forms of comparative research are closely intertwined. They can only be distinguished analytically.

In the comparative analysis of the various attitudes of the believers of canonical religions to authoritative texts, it must be noted first that 'liberal'²² and 'methodological agnostic'²³ scholars of comparative religion adopt analytically and ideologically positions that are fundamentally different from those of the believers of canonical religions. For faithful, these texts have a transcendental origin. They are, e.g., the Word of God given to them, or some other unique salvific manifestation of the meta-empirical. They therefore are true beyond doubt for believers, possess absolute authority for them, and are regarded, or better: confessed, as the sole source of salvation. For liberal and agnostic scholars of religions, however, canonicity is a cultural event, and as such a non-verifiable/non-falsifiable qualification that believers attribute to specific historical texts they have produced themselves. The texts, and their postulations, are their 'spiritual children'.²⁴

For a comparative study of the relationship of believers to texts that they regard as the unique standard of the correct faith, a few analytical questions can be designed for discovering how similar or different religions with canonical traditions are in this respect. To be manageable, they must be kept simple. They merely serve to expose a few common elements in the

²² I qualify as 'liberal' those believers of modern canonical religions who no longer urge their religion's exclusive claims on truth and salvation. Thereby they adopt a 'liberal' theology of dialogue with other religions of humankind that is fundamentally different from that of their former orthodox claim of the salvific unicity of e.g. *extra ecclesia nulla salus*.

²³ Methodological-agnostic scholars of religions take an agnostic position in respect of the explicit or implicit truth and efficacy claims of all religions on the methodological ground that these claims respect the 'unseen', i.e. the meta-empirical, the postulated existence and operation of which can neither be verified nor falsified before a forum of competent neutral scholars.

²⁴ Cf. W.C. Smith 1993: 4-12, 17-18. For Fernhout the Christian Bible is the one and only true canon. He therefore emphatically rejects this secular(ist) comparative approach. He asserts that an 'objective' phenomenology of canons requires that their claim to absolute truth and authority is accepted (Fernhout 1994: 7, 8, 13-22, 43-44). The claims to absolute authority of the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, and the Tripitaka cannot therefore be compared (Fernhout 1993: ix, 8, 14-15). In their stead he compares their 'proportional analogy': how much do these four canonical religions vary in pressing the absolute truth of their canons. Do, or do they not, concede a relative authority to non-canonical scriptures (Fernhout 1994: 6-9).

processes of attribution of authority in different religions, based on what similarities or differences can be discovered in their historical form and what explanations can be obtained from them.

For the time being I propose six research items: (1) Who attributed that authority? (2) Why did they grant it? (3) When and how was absolute authority attributed? (4) Against whom was it established and how did the canonization struggle proceed? (5) By what means, religious, cultural, political, military, economic, did the victors establish the supremacy of their (interpretation of the) canon? and (6) What religious and other goals were served by this investment of supreme authority in a canon? These questions serve not only to dissect the periods in which canons were created, but also to map the history of those canons in orthodox religions.

The limited space of this article allows me to address only the second, the most important of these six questions, in a little more detail. That is the question on what metaphysical foundation did believers of canonical religions attribute absolute normative authority to a text or group of texts. That fundament differs profoundly in Western and Eastern canonical religions. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam and related religions,²⁵ and in some modern religions,²⁶ that foundation is a militant, iconoclastic, ever more spiritualizing, meta-empirical god in heaven, who is said to have created all things, to suffer no cult of other gods, and to plan to destroy everything in the end. That jealous god is regarded as the one who has revealed the canonical text or collection of texts and to guarantee its truth and ultimate validity.²⁷ The most striking instance of this monotheist foundation is the Qur'an, for it is Al-lah himself who is – usually – speaking.²⁸ Moreover, the Koran is believed to be a ‘book in heaven’ that has been sent down to earth more often.²⁹ Muslims therefore made a fundamental distinction between ‘heathen’ (*kuffar/kafir*) non-book owners in *dar al-harb* (‘the world of war’), and *ahl al-kitâb*, ‘the people of the book’, i.e. all religions (of Jews, Christians, Mandaeans, Manichaeans, Parsees, etc.) that are believed by Muslims to possess an earlier version, however corrupt, of that heavenly book.³⁰ These non-Muslims are thereby entitled to reside as *dhimmi*, ‘protégées’, in the *dar al-Islam* (‘the world of Islam’).³¹

Canonical foundation was very different in Indian religions. Not only do we find atheist religions on the Indian subcontinent, such as Jainism and Buddhism, in which there is no god to serve as the final foundation of a canon’s validity.³² But more important is the pervasive

²⁵ Zoroastrianism, c.q. Parsism; the Mandaean religion; and Manichaeism

²⁶ E.g., Sikhism; Mormonism/Church of Jesus Christ of the Saints of the Latter Day; Tenrikyo (in Japan); and the neo-Hinduist Arya Samaj in India and in the Hindu diaspora.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Leipoldt & Morenz 1953: 29, 31, 33, 35-36

²⁸ Be it indirectly, through the ‘messages’, introduced by the command ‘Say’, which Mohamed as *rasul*, ‘messenger’, must deliver to *muslims*, to ‘those who obey’. Cf. Adams 1987: 157-159; Sheppard 1987: 66; Fernhout 1994: 22-23; van Koningsveld [1981]: 16; Leemhuis 1984: 64-66; cf. also Leipoldt & Morenz 1953: 60-61

²⁹ On books in heaven in the ancient Near East, cf. Graham 1987: 135; W.C. Smith 1993: 59-61; Leipoldt & Morenz 1953: 32; on the Quran as a book in heaven, cf. Leemhuis 1984: 67-68; Leipoldt & Morenz 1953: 31; on some rabbis teaching that the Thora exists with God from eternity and that God created the world for the sake of the Thora, cf. Leipoldt & Morenz 1953: 9, 25-26, 31, 185-186, 191, 195.

³⁰ Cf. also Leipoldt & Morentz 1953: 10; Wiegers 1995: 304sq.

³¹ Cf. Wiegers 1995, 304sq.

³² In Indian cosmology there is no god who creator god who created the universe from nothing, maintains it and will in the end destroy it. Both Jainism and Buddhism do, however, believe in an unseen reality - above, below and inside - in addition to that of humans. They believe, e.g., in *karma* (‘actions’) and *samsara* (‘rebirth’): i.e., in the consequences human actions have in an invisible reality wider than the visible world of humans; and that these consequences must be expiated in one or several rebirths and so will affect them negatively or positively. Cf. e.g.,

belief that the meta-empirical is present within empirical reality in many *murtis*, manifestations. E.g., in the hero god Rama whose ‘descent’ as an incarnation of Vishnu into this world is narrated in the *Ramayana* epic; in the Rg-Veda hymns in which the ‘seers’ (*rishi*) of primordial time long ago recorded their visions of the divine; in Brahman, the purely immaterial supernatural, which is ‘manifest’ in the creator-god Brahma, in the Brahmanical priesthood, and ‘operates’ in the mantras recited by Brahmins during sacrifices. This Brahman is also believed to be transmitted when a Brahmin teaches the Vedas to the ‘twice born’.³³ Finally, the supernatural was also seen as at work in the person, the words spoken, and the actions of a ‘saint’ (*sadhu*), and the *guru*, one’s private teacher. In its many ‘de-scents’ the meta-empirical is clearly diffuse, varied, material, and personal in Indian religions.

As a result, in religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Sikhism, canonical scriptures originated from the *sutras*, teachings about paths to salvation by saints, sages, and itinerant teachers, such as Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 480-400 BCE), the Buddha, ‘de Verlichte’.³⁴ In Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, canonical scriptures explicitly replaced the teachers who ‘founded’ these religions after their deaths. After the Buddha, there is *Dhamma*, [his] ‘doctrine’.³⁵ After the twenty-four ‘fordmakers’, whom Jain regard as the founders of their religion, there are the Jain scriptures.³⁶ After the ten gurus of Sikhism, there is the *Adi Granth* scripture, who (!) is also called *Guru Granth*, and *Granth Sahib*, ‘Lord Granth’.³⁷

In Eastern cultural contexts, canons are therefore not the Word of God that descended into this world as a person or a book, but rather the salvific teaching of a human guru, or a chain of gurus, who discovered the unique path to salvation through ascetic meditation in seclusion and taught it to their followers. Having grasped it, they had thereby ‘annihilated’ the chains of rebirth (*samsara*) and had disappeared, leaving behind *dhamma*, ‘doctrine’, as the one unique path to salvation from the suffering of rebirths. Their followers, having memorized their teaching in *sutras*, aphorisms, sometime later began to write them down and collect them, thereby setting the process of their canonization in motion.

The Distribution of Canonical Texts

The attribution of absolute authority to a text or a collection of texts, as well as the loss of that authority, are historical processes in specific cultural, economic, political, and other contexts. Therefore, the comparative analysis of canonical texts should proceed mainly diachronically and geographically. I limit myself here to proposing a few analytical instruments for investigating how canons emerged and were spread. I will come back to the comparative analysis of the process of loss of authority below.

The emergence and distribution of canons can be made visible with the help of the following analyses: (1) of the origin of canonical texts with all that it entails in terms of their

Dundas 1992: 94.

³³ I.e., to anyone belonging to one the three upper *varnas*: Brahmins, warrior nobility, and farmers and merchants + farmers.

³⁴ Cf. Graham 1987a: 67-77; Dundas 1993: 53

³⁵ Cf. Rahula 1990: 155; Harvey 1990: 26

³⁶ Cf. Dundas 1993: 53-54

³⁷ McLeod 1984: 1-5, 38-55; 1989: 6, 44, 57, 60-62, 75

editorial histories; (2) of the attribution of authority, first to the individual texts, then to a corpus of texts, and the further history of the canon; (3) of the conservation and transmission of the text(s), whether oral or written; (4) of their geographical distribution; and (5) of the role translation into other languages played in their distribution.

I can only address the last two points here. In the comparative study of the distribution of canonical texts, it matters much whether they are passed on orally or in written form. Oral/-aural canonical texts can hardly be disseminated, because a text stored exclusively in a few memories can be transmitted only by other long memorization processes, transmitting a canonical text, e.g., from a Brahmin father to his son, or from a Buddhist monk to a few novices. That knowledge, and the usufruct of that knowledge, is thereby reserved to only a very few faithful. And this is so for a purpose, for the wide distribution of an oral canonical text is usually unwelcome or explicitly forbidden. For here too, and here especially, knowledge is power. Which privilege is often legitimized in the canonical texts themselves, being presented as part of the primordial setting of things since 'long ago', or by some divine command. In addition, many other factors promoting or hindering the dissemination of a canon should be considered, e.g. infrastructure facilitating communication, the political order pre-vailing, the economic context, etc.

Written canons could be distributed more widely, but how widely depended greatly on, e.g., the phonemic characters used in writing. It makes a great difference to the dissemination of a scripture whether it is written in a script with thousands of ideographic characters, as in Far Eastern languages, or with an alphabet consisting of only twenty phonemic letters as in the West. The material on which and with which one writes or prints also makes a great difference for dissemination. In past centuries, print technologies have ranged from printing on stone, wood, papyrus, parchment, paper, and plastic, to modern digital pages and electronic storage.

In terms of dissemination technologically, scriptures were spread along four stages: the manuscript, lithography (printing on stone), xylography (printing by means of woodcut), and typography (printing by means of loose types and text formatting). The oldest lithographic texts were printed in China after 631 CE when selections of the Buddhist canon were engraved in chalkstone. They absorbed ink that well that those engravings could serve as matrices for prints on paper that were bound into the oldest known block books. From 972 CE onwards, xylography was also practiced in China, and later in Korea. Block books of the entire Buddhist canon were produced in the 12th and 13th centuries in Korea on 80.000 small wood shelves. Experiments in typographical print with loose Chinese ideographic characters baked in pottery or cast in tin had also begun in China by that time. But they proved unsuccessful because the Chinese writing system consists of thousands of ideographic characters that had to be produced one by one. In China, typography therefore never became an alternative to xylography.³⁸

As for manuscripts, their production was far too costly to produce to serve a wide distribution of canonical scriptures. Their wide distribution became possible only after 1450 CE by the invention of printing in Europe. There the development of typography was greatly facilitated by Western languages using phonemic alphabets of only about twenty letters. This laid the foundation for a wide distribution of canonical texts, especially of the Christian Bible, and its de-elitization. But it was only in the 19th and 20th centuries that the bible and the canonical

³⁸ Lancaster 1987: 506-509

texts of other religions were actually distributed widely because by then virtually all humans had been taught how to read and write, at first in Western societies and after decolonization also in the rest of the world. In these literate and increasingly affluent societies with *éducation permanente* and ever smarter communication technology, even the lower classes enjoyed sufficient ‘free time’ (σχόλη, *scholè* in Greek) to buy the bible and other canonical texts and take part in the ever more fragmented and fragmenting discussion of their truth and validity.

Another important factor in the wider dissemination of canonical texts is their translation in other languages. The distinction between oral and written canons is again important here. Oral/aural memorized canons were not translated when disseminated. In addition, they usually also did not adapt to the normal processes of language change in their native and in foreign societies, being passed on orally in rituals and in esoteric education.³⁹ In the long run they became at first archaic relics understood and managed only by a small group of religious scholars, then continued for a long time as meaningless sounds, and ultimately disappeared.

Translation, on the other hand, contributed enormously to the dissemination of the canons,⁴⁰ but at a price because translation into a foreign language inevitably involved doctrinal reinterpretation and change, from subtle to radical. Moreover, the canons translated were often expanded with locally produced additional scriptures.

The translation of a canonical scripture might, however, also be interdicted. Which might contribute to the expansion of its language over large new areas. As was the case, e.g., with the Qur’an in parts of the non-Arabic speaking Muslim societies.⁴¹ After Arabic had been adopted by the elite, who greatly benefitted from speaking the language of the ‘holy book’, it was gradually adopted, or imposed, also on non-Arabic speaking Muslims.

The comprehensive framework

The important place of the canonical phase in the history of religions can best be outlined by contrasting it with pre-, sub-, and post-canonical religion.⁴² I emphasize that no actual religions are compared. I rather summarize the general characteristics which these three kinds of religions appear to share based on historical, archaeological and ethnographic research.⁴³ I also emphasize that this comparison provides helpful insight not only in the long-term general his-

³⁹ Cf. e.g. Hindu and Buddhist canonical texts in Sanskrit and Pali and the Jewish and Christian Hebrew Thora/Bible.

⁴⁰ Cf. W.C. Smith 1993: 245sq about the five great projects of canon translation between 2000 BCE and now that played a major role in the history of religions in the last 4.000 years: the translation of Sumerian holy scriptures into Akkadian at about 2000 BCE; the Septuagint translation into Greek in the 3rd and 2nd century BCE; the translation of the Buddhist Sanskrit canon into Chinese in the 1st millennium CE, and then into Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, etc. (cf. also Lancaster 1987: 506-509; W.C. Smith 1993: 320sq.); the translation of the Christian Bible in about 2000 languages in the 19th and 20th centuries CE (cf. also Lanczkowski 1956: 35sq. on earlier translations of the Bible); and the translation of the communist publications of Marx, Engels and others in many languages in the 20th century.

⁴¹ Cf. Wiegers 1995 for this rule, and for exceptions.

⁴² I add ‘sub-canonical’ religion now, spring 2026! Analytically, this conceptual category would cover primarily the ‘folk’ religions that some canonical religions have persecuted or kept in check and chain, and others have suffered and accommodated. These often barely visible religions need to be recognized as a specific category of religions in the general history of religions, for they are constrained by their own extra-religious (and religious) contexts and possess traits different from those of pre-canonical, canonical and post-canonical religions.

⁴³ I distinguish six types of societies and six corresponding kinds of religions in the general history of religions of humankind from the Paleolithic till now; cf. Platvoet 1993: 233-242. I amalgamate the first two as the pre-canonical religions. Canonical religion coincides with my fifth kind, and post-canonical with the sixth.

tory of religions so far, but also in developments that are taking place now or will likely occur soon.

Pre-canonical religion

‘Pre-canonical religion’ summarizes the marks that past and present preliterate religions share. As a group they constitute not only the numerically largest but also the oldest kind of religions of humankind. As a category and as a group of religions they precede canonical religions in the general history of the religions of humankind. Their shared past begins somewhere in the fog of the evolution of humankind. Their earliest document, and of the history of human religions, is currently the grave in the floor of the Border Cave, in presentday South Africa, in which a girl was buried 103,000 years ago along with grave goods and red ochre.⁴⁴

Preliterate societies are diachronically as well as synchronically very diverse. For example, they vary greatly in size. At one demographic extreme we find the extremely small, egalitarian wandering bands of nomadic food gatherers and hunters with no social organization other than nuclear kinship, but with complex languages, a wealth of proverbs and stories, a rich knowledge of their natural environment, clever technology, a lot of welfare despite a low level of prosperity, and irreligious religion.⁴⁵

From these tiny bands of food gatherers to the gradual growth in demography of nomadic pastoralist preliterate societies, and then to the again significantly larger sedentary village societies with shifting agriculture (both having extended unilateral kinship as their main form of social organization), we find at the other end of demographic scale of preliterate societies, e.g. in precolonial Africa, a few large preliterate societies in which population increased rapidly due to a favorable ecology and climate fostering the further development of agriculture, e.g. through irrigation. In them we discover also labour specialization, an elite emerging, incipient urbanization, the monarchical state as well as institutional and other differentiation.⁴⁶ It is in these largest complex preliterate societies⁴⁷ that we discover the extra-religious contexts from which in the past in other places ‘canonical religions’ had arisen, as I will explain below.

If, for a moment, we leave aside these few demographically largest and institutionally most complex preliterate societies, then we may summarize the main marks of preliterate societies by the following four traits. One is that all members of preliterate societies are taught the basic technology of that society. There is therefore no labour specialization in them except that between the sexes. Another is that they are egalitarian because they have no elite and are not stratified. A third is that their members live in a tiny and secluded world, both geographically in terms of contact and commerce with neighbour societies, and diachronically in terms of their collective memory of the past, which has a shallow depth from two to at most ten past generations since ‘creation’.

⁴⁴ Cf. Platvoet 1996: 49 for this cave on the border of Kwa-Zulu/Natal and Swaziland.

⁴⁵ Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1995a on the !Kung of the Kalahari.

⁴⁶ Cf. e.g. Bartle 1983 and Platvoet 1985 about the Akan of Ghana.

⁴⁷ E.g. that of the Yoruba in modern South-east Nigeria, and the Akan in Ghana.

A fourth is that they do not practice primitive or savage thought⁴⁸ but ‘multi-stranded thought’,⁴⁹ the pre-reflective thinking common to all common people in all past and present human societies, and therefore also in the modern ones with philosophy and science. That mode of thought thinks by entangled groups of complex powerful social symbols, often pairs, e.g. male/female, elder/child, the bride in radiant white/the widow in black, etc. All members of all societies acquire these pre-reflective cognitive skills automatically in their upbringing. They subtly govern their social behaviour and cause them to display the appropriate deferent behavior that is expected of them in specific social situations in line with his or her role and status in that situation.⁵⁰ It manifests itself in the right bodily posture, clothing and gifts; in the appropriate compliments, witty sayings, proverbs and entertaining stories; and in the other forms of proper coded interaction with others.

This socialized and socializing thought is tied to specific social situations. It is activated only in and by those situations. Outside these situations, it remains below the threshold of consciousness and is inaccessible to reflection, systematization, and criticism.⁵¹ It is moreover scattered over many different social situations and absent from the mind until it is activated by the specific social situation for which it provides appropriate behaviour and witty speech. And it is never explicitly and coherently formulated and analyzed. But precisely this inarticulate, complex, fragmented, inaccessible thinking very effectively organizes the interaction between socialized subjects. In all human societies, even the most modern and complex, all social behaviour is governed by this submerged multistranded thought.

As was, and is, the case in all pre-canonical religion in any preliterate society. Their collective concepts about the unseen were, and are, also governed by scattered, reflection-resistant socializing thinking, for in these societies, religion is the befitting behaviour of believers towards a postulated, complex, meta- and intra-empirical invisible ‘reality’,⁵² scattered over several distinct invisible worlds.⁵³ This ‘intercourse’ with the unseen in ritual and other religiously inspired behaviour, activates the relevant entangled beliefs for a moment only, not in concepts or teachings, but in appropriate role behavior, and then lets it sink below the threshold of consciousness again, until another need for intercourse with the unseen resuscitates it again.

Preliterate religions therefore show radically different characteristics from doctrinal canonical religions. Pre-canonical religions, for example, have no certainty about the invisible;

⁴⁸ Defined as *pensée sauvage*, ‘savage thought’ by Lévi-Strauss (1962) and as prelogical thinking by association, imagination and mystical participation, as do children, and as the lowest stage in human cognitive development, in opposition to the highest stage, our own modern analytical thinking by cause and effect by Lévy-Bruhl 1910, 1922; van der Leeuw 1937. It served until recently as a perfect conceptual tool for legitimizing colonization as ‘the white man’s burden’.

⁴⁹ Cf. Gellner 1988: 40-69

⁵⁰ This behaviour, says Evans-Pritchard (1936: 196) is actualized in rituals and prayers but never intellectualised in myths and doctrines. He emphasized several times that “what they had to express, they expressed in action, and they had little more to add by way of commentary” (Evans-Pritchard 1936: 186-187; 1937: 178, 314, 338, 347, 349, 475, 540; 1956: 318-320; 1965: 84).

⁵¹ It is even resistant to reflection; cf. Platvoet 1995b: 35-36

⁵² Cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956: 144

⁵³ In the religion of the Akan of Ghana seven such distinct, loosely connected worlds may be distinguished: (1) Nyame, God, and *abosom*, ‘gods’; (2) *Asase Yaa*, Earth; (3) *nsamanfo*, ancestors; (4) the ‘souls’ of humans: *kra*, *sunsum*, *mogya*; (5) ‘revengeful souls’ (*susnsum* with *sasa*) in plants, animals, amulets, ‘medicins’, and humans; (6) *abayifo*, witches; and (7) the forestgod *Sasabonsom* and the *mmoatia*, forest gnomes.

doubt and disbelief are endemic in them.⁵⁴ As a result, they are open, adaptive, adoptive, flexible, dynamic, and tolerant in regard of the religious views of other religions, preliterate as well as canonical.⁵⁵ Though each of them, as ‘community religion’, coincides with a specific society,⁵⁶ they also exhibit a great deal of internal variation and personal construction, for they do not establish boundaries, whether *ad intra* or *ad extra*.⁵⁷ Devotion is hardly ever fervent, except briefly, at a great calamity. Religious practice is usually minimalist, ephemeral, and pragmatic. Religious rituals serve wellbeing in this life only. Concepts of sin, judgement, heav-en or hell are foreign to it, as is eschatology,⁵⁸ ethical reflection, and the imposition of a binding set of ethical commands. Belief in life after death is entirely in function of the belief in the active presence of the deceased among the living.

Because institutional specialization is absent or at most minimal in preliterate societies, ‘religion’ is not found in them as a distinct institution. Rather it is part, and often only a modest, submerged, barely visible part of social, political, economic, technological, therapeutic, and other forms of social behavior, all of them entangled in multistranded thought. The Western dichotomies sacred/profane, sacred/secular, spiritual/material, and natural/-supernatural are inapplicable to these religions and misleading in their study as conceptual instruments. Nor can preliterate religions be classified as either poly-, mono- or pantheist religions. Rather, these religions are often mono-, poly- and pantheist at the same time. Preliterate religions are not controlled by an elite. Part-time ‘religious specialists’, such as mediums, healers, priests and prophets are found only in the demographically larger preliterate societies.⁵⁹

So far, I have emphasized that preliterate religions and canonical religions differ by showing that an elite articulating and systematizing the faith of a society, propagating an orthodoxy as the only way to salvation for everyone everywhere, and persecuting competitors as ‘heretics’, is absent in and alien to preliterate societies. In doing so, I show that the processes that elevate certain textual corpora to *regula fidei* have never yet been set in motion in these religions. They could never have been set in motion because these societies were institutionally not (yet) equipped for the doctrinalization and canonization of their religious beliefs, for the extra-religious developments which might have made canonization possible have not yet occurred.

However, one can also look for similarities between canonical and pre-canonical religions by redefining and expanding ‘canon’, as did Jonathan Z. Smith.⁶⁰ For him, a canon has two essential characteristics. First, it is any closed list,⁶¹ selecting arbitrarily a few objects or

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. Evans-Pritchard (1956: 11sq) about Nuer confessions of ignorance in respect of God and spirits.

⁵⁵ Cf. Goody 1986: 7sq

⁵⁶ They are therefore co-extensive with each preliterate society. As a result, there were/are as many preliterate religions as there were/are preliterate societies. However, a critical note should be added about the modern notion of ‘a society’. We think of societies as sharply defined ‘nations’ with well-defined territories and strongly defended borders, central governments, their own language and distinct culture. Preliterate societies do have their distinct culture, social structure, language and religion, but in an open, fluid manner without any sharp demarcations

⁵⁷ Cf. Goody 1986: 4sq

⁵⁸ They do have funny stories about ‘long ago’: a primatology without a creator; cf. Platvoet 1995, 1999, 2000, 2012

⁵⁹ Cf. e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1940: 184-189; 1956: 287-322 about Nuer priests and Nuer prophets.

⁶⁰ Smith 1988: 36-52. I thank Karel van der Toorn for drawing my attention to this *redescription of canon* by Smith.

⁶¹ Smith 1988: 48

texts with a religious, legal, legitimizing, classifying or speculative function, from an infinite supply of other objects or texts that could have fulfilled these functions also. Secondly, this limited list of arbitrarily selected objects and/or texts becomes an instrument in the hands of hermeneutics who apply it with ingenious inventiveness to an infinite number of social situations.⁶² Oracle priests, e.g., exhibit in preliterate societies the same ‘obsession with exegetical totalization as the interpreters of the book religions.’⁶³

Smith cites five examples of such ‘totalist and complete systems of signs or icons that serve as functional equivalents of a written canon’ in preliterate societies.⁶⁴ These include the ‘less than two hundred and fifty drawings’ with which the Walbiri Aborigines in Australia can summarize any story, whether it be about something mundane, or about a dream someone recently had, or about the ancestral traditions reserved for initiates.⁶⁵ He also mentions the fifty-eight figurines depicting human and animal forms of the Senufo of West Africa; the complex system of two hundred and sixty-six characters of the Dogon in Mali; the twenty-four objects that the Ndembu fortuneteller handles in Zambia; and the famous Ifa oracle system of the Yoruba in South-East Nigeria. The latter consists of one thousand and twenty-four poems (*odù*) of five to fifty lines that are linked to two hundred and fifty-six oracle signs. The Babalawo (oracle minister) selects the *odù*, which applies to his client, by taking sixteen palm nuts eight times in one movement from one palm to the other and noting the ‘results’ in two rows of four dashes on the wooden Ifa oracle board sprinkled with white pipe earth. If two nuts remain in his palm, he writes one dash. If one remains, two dashes.⁶⁶

Useful research is certainly possible into similarities between the ways in which the exegesis of canons functions in canonical religions and how certain divination systems are operated in pre-canonical religions. However, there are also several critical comments to be made about the curious canon concept that Jonathan Z. Smith designed for such an investigation and about the examples that he discovered in preliterate religions. These partly concern the heuristic, analytical and theoretical usefulness of this wide(r) concept of canon, and partly the unreliability of the ethnographic data, particularly those of the Dogon.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the complex, urbanising Yoruba societies and the Ifa oracle are quite exceptional for preliterate societies and are therefore not representative of this category of societies and religions. Another problem is the synchronous nature of the ethnographic data used by Smith, which lacks historical depth. As a result, it is not clear how long or short such a canon’ functioned. The most objectionable, however, is the suggestion of J.Z. Smith that these preliterate ‘canons’ were always a single stable central system. Ethnographic data rather show that pre-literate societies almost always consulted several divination systems⁶⁸ and that those systems constantly change (however stable they may appear to their practitioners), and are replaced by new ones, usually

⁶² Smith 1988: 40, 43sq, 48-52

⁶³ Smith 1988: 44,48

⁶⁴ Smith 1988: 49

⁶⁵ Smith 1988: 49

⁶⁶ Smith 1988: 49sq. Cf. Abimbola 1977 for a description of the Ifa oracle and a translation of the most important categories of the 16 kinds of Ifa *odu*/

⁶⁷ Cf. Van Beek 1991; Lettens 1971

⁶⁸ Cf. e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1937 for his descriptions of the Azande poison oracle (258-351), the termite oracle (352-357), the little sticks oracle (358sq), the rubbing oracle (359-374), nine other oracles he had not investigated, and Azande dream oracles by eating *ngua musumo*, ‘dream medicine’ (378-386). In addition, the public spirit possession trance dances of the Azande witch hunt societies also served as oracle (148-182).

imported from neighbour societies. Jonathan Smith has extracted his data from syn-chronizing ethnographies fixing cultural-historical processes in the 'now' of fieldwork. And in the context of his reductive comparison, he has further stripped them of their innate propension to change due to their changing contexts (in an active and passive sense!). Finally, he has linked these data to processes alien to fluid preliterate societies, to wit to abstraction, generalization, and fixation, produced by an elite through reflection, usually with the help of writing. Which processes in their turn stem from, and contribute to, institutional differentiation far greater than the rudimentary institutionalization of preliterate societies allows.⁶⁹

Canonical religion

'Canonical religions' are the product of a complex, long, and gradual socio-historical change in the general history of the societies and religions of humankind from the 4th millennium BCE onwards. That change began in small village societies with a gradually improving food production technology, an agrarian economy and modest demographic growth. That technological, economical, and demographic growth increased gradually in the earliest city-state societies. It fostered the development of new cognitive technologies such as the arts of accounting, writing, and reading, as well as other important developments in the political and institutional organization of these societies.⁷⁰ Doctrinal, and more specifically canonical religions, however, began to emerge much later only, during the (first) 'axial age' (1000 BCE - 700 CE), after a small elite with ample wealth and leisure (σχόλη, *scholè* in Greek) had developed additional new cognitive skills, and in particular early forms of reflective, analytic, systematic and abstract thought.⁷¹

These skills were developed, at first for pragmatic secular purposes such as the storage of food, the market and trade, walls and warfare, and the codification of laws. But soon they were used also for building temples and palaces in these earliest cities, and in state liturgies in which the myths were performed that glorified and legitimized the monarch and upper class in power.⁷² From 1000 BCE onwards, during the (first) Axial Age, these skills were used also for reflection on (the sources of) revelation, (salvific) religion, and (dualist) ethics,⁷³ and eschatology (transporting the final validation of the faith to an afterlife). And also for doctrinalizing religion in order to establish the truth of a person's private or small group faith against the doctrinally and ethically non-committal community religion of one's society, or even against humanity at large, in order to assert that the faiths of others, and other societies, are false. Some

⁶⁹ Cf. Goody 1986: 15, 19-23, 27, 29-32. Cf. also Bauer & Hinnant 1987 for 'paradigm shifts' in oracle and other divination systems; and Karp & Bird 1987 for approaches stressing the dynamics in African systems of thought.

⁷⁰ Cf. Platvoet 1993a: 231sq, 235; 1993b (its English version).

⁷¹ Cf. Goody 1986: 16-20, and Platvoet 1993a: 236, 240sq on script as an instrument of ideological power and a means for the accumulation of wealth.

⁷² That constituted the earliest split between 'official', or upper society religion, and 'popular' or 'folk religion' of illiterate farmers and villagers. Cf. Below the section on 'sub-canonical religion'; and Vrijhof & Waardenburg 1979.

⁷³ For the first time in the history of human societies, an intimate connection was gradually established, in different ways, between religion and ethics. But, however different, they had in common that salvation was spiritualized from salvation in this life to salvation from this life after this life.

such assertive ‘true faiths’ with a universal doctrinal and salvific aspiration were recorded and fixed in scriptures and canonized for worldwide export through ‘mission’.

The greatest density of canon formation is found at the very end of the first axial period. Between 100 and 700 CE, the historically best-known canons of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were compiled and closed, and others that are less well-known, such as those of Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Manichaeism. Canon formation was thus the conclusion of the huge religious and related changes of the ‘First Axial Period’, from 1000 BCE to 700 CE. In that long period, thinkers had increasingly begun to reflect systematically and polemically about the meaning of human existence, ethical norms, and religious beliefs. As a result, traits became prominent in the new religious movements of the first axial period that were completely absent from, and alien to, the community religions of the pre-canonical period, or that were at most potentially present in them. One was ethics. Another was doctrine. A third truth. A fourth mission.

In the Western, monotheist, spiritualizing variant of the new canonical religions, the focus was on obedience to the commandments ‘from above’, from an increasingly de-materialized god in a meta-material heaven. And therefore, on the moral quality of human behaviour by an emphasis on the absolute opposition of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and on divine judgment after death or in afterlife, and on either eternal salvation in heaven or damnation forever in hell. All of which beliefs were linked intimately to the new concepts of ‘sin’ and ‘guilt’, and to frightful tales about cosmic battles in an apocalyptic endtime drama, and having to take sides in this cosmic battle with either God or the devil, concluded with a mass resurrection of the dead and divine judgement on all.

In the Eastern variant, obedience to ‘the path’ discovered was also crucial, but ethical reflection was of a very different kind. It focused on the presumed impersonal automatic effects of human behaviour in this life on rebirths beyond this life, without any judgment, punishment or reward ‘from above’. Its goal was radical redemption from *samsara*, rebirths, through e.g. the ascetic lifestyles of Hindu ‘homeless’, *sannyasi*, Jain ‘victors’, *jinās*, and Buddhist ‘beggars’, *bhikkhu*, who withdrew from ‘the world’ in order to develop a mystical spirituality of unification with the transtemporal, transpersonal and transcognitive. They taught ‘paths’ to their followers by which ‘the veil of ignorance’ might be removed, endless suffering discerned as the ‘true nature’ of human existence, the desire for existence quenched (*nirvana*), and the ‘ocean of suffering’ (of endless rebirths, *samsara*) crossed to the ‘untrodden other side’ of the No-Something.

Even more important than this intimate connection to ethics, however, was the emergence of religious doctrine a little later. From 600 BCE religious teachers went on tours to preach ‘right doctrine’ to the ‘ignorant’ folk believers of the community religions, and against religious competitors, and began to attract pupils and to found communities of faithful followers. As a result, the inarticulate beliefs of pre-canonical religion briefly activating appropriate religious behaviour and then sinking again below the threshold of articulation, began to be polemically articulated in the doctrines of new, well-articulated, polemical faiths, and to be

disseminated by preachers, teachers and missionaries as the religious doctrines which the believers of these new faiths must explicitly confess in order to be admitted to these new 'sects'.⁷⁴ Thereby, hard and sharp boundaries were established within the former inarticulate community religions of these societies, and of neighbour societies, by means of ever fiercer and ever more exclusive claims to religious truth, and a sectarian organization of its believers. And ultimately also to claims that this particular sectarian religion alone had received the complete and final 'revelation' about the unseen, had recorded it in its sacred scripture, and was therefore the one unique way to salvation for all the world, to which all humans must convert in order to be 'saved'.⁷⁵ Which salvific unicity its missionaries had to proclaim to all nations. This universalist claim is found in the most typical canons of the end of the 'axial age': the Buddhist, Christian, Manichean, and Muslim, three of which became 'world religions'.⁷⁶ The other canons are expressions of developments that progressed less far along this road.

Buddhist and Christian missionaries and Muslim conquerors were that successful in dispersing their faiths over numerous societies that they became, at least nominally, the one and only permitted religion of several nations and empires. As a result, these sectarian canonical religions themselves became 'canonical community religions', a new kind: in principle intolerant, but in fact forced to compromise because they had to accommodate large numbers of faithful of precanonical community religions with a precanonical religious mentality, and needs, aims and practices canonical religions would normally not tolerate, and certainly not satisfy. They tackled this problem of the 'subcanonical religion' of their ignorant folk believers in different ways.

Subcanonical religion

In the past two millennia, subcanonical religion was found in those early, well-developed, literate societies in which a canonical religion, foreign or homebred, had become its 'established', sectarian, doctrinal, missionary community religion for all its members, literate as well as non- or barely literate, despite its sectarian nature. Canonical religions are by origin and nature sectarian. They begin as small religious communities with exclusivist intolerant religious belief claims that are as such, at least in part, incompatible with the beliefs of their native pre-canonical community religions. To which distinctly different religion, the believers of the pre-canonical community religions must 'convert' by explicitly and ritually cutting their ties with their original 'pagan', or 'heathen', or 'idolatrous' community religion.

⁷⁴ Cf. Goody 1986, 4sq, 10-13. The etymology of 'sect' here is both from *sequor*, to follow, and from *secare*, to cut off.

⁷⁵ The *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* claim of the Roman Catholic church. The concept of 'world religion' was developed only in the 19th century. Strictly taken, it applies only to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and a few other (tiny) modern religions that claim that they are the unique path and means to salvation for all humans of any place and age.

⁷⁶ It is unfortunate that the concept of 'world religion' has been widened to cover any religion of 'large size, wide geographical distribution, and big impact on world history' (Young 1992: 111). As a result any well-known religion, even if it is demographically quite small such as Judaism, is counted among the world religions despite the fact that it clearly is, and is determined to remain, a community religion to which one belongs by birth only, and to which 'converts' are not really welcome. The same goes for 'Hinduism', a Western colonial construct and a self-fulfilling prophecy. The claim that it possesses an exclusive and complete revelation for all the world is completely alien to it, not only because it formally regards at least three different major Hindu devotion cults as equally valid and effective ways to salvation; but also because it actually consists of many more cults.

Pre-canonical community religions, however, are religions of which one becomes a member at birth and remains a practitioner ‘from cradle to grave’. The belief notions of these hospitable, receptive, non-missionary religions are never explicitly taught, or preached, but acquired by participation in its rites and festivals. They are not focused on sin and forgiving, on guilt and penance, or on heaven or hell in an afterlife, but on healing, prosperity, success, ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ in this life, and address a plurality of unseen agents and means by which they may perhaps achieve them. They attend to the pragmatic, low intensity, plural(ist) religious needs of their believers by ritual sacrifices of animals in (the humble) ‘temples’ for the gods, libations and meals for honoring the ancestors on their graves, divination to find causes of misfortunes, soothsaying, astrology, faithhealing, allnight trance dance in secluded spirit possession centres, exorcism, the wearing amulets and drinking an ablution of, e.g., a Qurannic or other holy text written on a slate for a cure, etc. Pre-canonical community religions are open, tolerant, pragmatic, poly-theist/pluralist, low intensity religions with a minimal articulation of their religious beliefs. They never aspire to serve as a universal road to salvation beyond this life. Rather than engaging in outward expansion by mission, they are an ‘open house’ for religious innovation, internal and from elsewhere, and for the practice of plural religious allegiance by active participation in two or more distinct religious communities, even in those of a canonical kind that explicitly forbid such double religious practices and qualify it as relapse into idolatry.⁷⁷

Subcanonical and canonical religion have cohabited in the past in a range of relationships, from hostile and uneasy to pleasant and respectful. The relationship of Christianity and Islam with earlier community religions is of the hostile and uneasy kinds, both Christianity and Islam marking sub-canonical religion out for destruction by condemning it dogmatically and juridically as idolatry,⁷⁸ witchcraft, sorcery, magic, stupid ignorance, illegitimate syncretism,⁷⁹ or as evil, ‘black’, demonic magic.⁸⁰ In the name of their Godgiven truth, Christian and Muslim

⁷⁷ For plural religious allegiance, cf., e.g., Platvoet 1979, and Van den Broek (1979: 25), quoting from a sermon by Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, North Africa, the confession of one of his parishioners: “It is true, I go to the idols, I consult magicians and soothsayers, but I do not forsake the church of God; I am a Catholic!”

⁷⁸ As did Tertulian (160-230) by condemning Christians who participated in libations upon the graves of the dead; and Lactantius (240-325) and Augustine (354-430) preaching against the consultation of diviners and astrologers (cf. Van den Broek 1979: 16, *passim*). For Islam, cf. Waardenburg 1979: 340-342 on Ibn Taimiya (1263-1328) rejecting the veneration of saints and of the dead as *bid’a*, (illegitimate ‘innovation’) and *shirk*, (heretical) ‘associationism’, i.e. idolatry. Cf. also *afkodre* as the stigmatizing designation of *winti*, the religion of the slaves of African descent on the plantations of Surinam.

⁷⁹ Or as ‘religion’, e.g. by some Indian gurus and Buddhist monks, and Western scholars and philosophers who compare them, negatively, with their own ‘correct’, non-religious cosmology in order to ridicule and reject them as inferior credulity.

⁸⁰ And adopted by uncritical scholars, e.g. by Dandekar (1987: 215): ‘Side by side with this religion of the [higher] “classes” among the Vedic Aryans developed the religion of the “masses”, which was largely constituted of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. For a correct approach, cf. Goody (1986: 23): ‘Literate religion claims dominance [...] and defines [pre-literate religion] away as “magic”, as “folk”, as deviation from the right path’. For an analysis of the substantive differences between folk and orthodox religion, cf. Gombrich (1988: 25-26). He distinguishes between dogmatic soteriological missionary religions that aim to surpass single societies and teach individual believers that their *summum bonum* is (in a) life after death; and the community or folk religions of single societies that consist of sets of patterns of beliefs and relationships with whatever unseen beings it traditionally happens to postulate and venerate or pacify. These ‘community religions’ mark the stages of life, from birth to burial, celebrate its fortunes and assist in its misfortunes. Whereas soteriological religions teach a religious doctrine, assert its ‘truth’, and require explicit assent to it, community religions teach no religious doctrine nor require assent to their often rather muddy, open and adoptive beliefs about the unseen. They are co-extensive with their societies

orthodoxy have in the past deprived popular piety, as well as they could, of its inarticulate, complex, religiously pluralistic but psychologically very effective religious facilities.

But they did so at a price, for both Christianity and Islam had to adapt to the precanonical habits and needs of their numerous pre- or low-literate believers. Because stern Christian and Muslim strictly monotheist piety failed to satisfy the pluralist, pragmatic religious needs of their common believers, and because canonical orthodoxy effectively atrophied most precanonical religious practices in the course of time through *RE*, religious education, and banned the remainder, both Christianity and Islam had to find ways and means to meet the religious needs of their non- or low-literate believers. They did so by expanding, reluctantly, the range of devotions permitted and increased greatly, and on purpose, the number of martyrs, saints and marabouts, and other unseen helpers who might be addressed.⁸¹ Thus, the pluralist ‘heathen’ cults of gods and goddesses and ancestors were replaced quickly with the equally pluralist veneration of Christian martyrs and saints and Muslim marabouts, and of their tombs, relicts, amulets, and places of pilgrimage, and other popular devotions, e.g. of Mary and the Sacred Heart, or of *Sufi tariqa* (orders) seeking mystical union through *dzikr* (dissociative repetitive prayer). In the same way they also commuted the precanonical pagan libations and meals at the graves of the deceased by strongly fostering the commemoration of the dead by their burial in churches and church yards, and by numerous masses being said for the repose of the souls of the dead. In addition, they had to cope, often with grave misgivings, with many spirit possession centres and societies, from Tarantella trance dance to Pentecostal glossolalia, and from *zar* possession by *jinn* to *Sufi dhikr* in quest of mystical union with Allah. And though both Christianity and Islam claimed to possess the complete and final revelation and had banned therefore all new revelation, their folk believers continued to ‘receive’ and report numerous visions, apparitions, stigmata, and miraculous cures from diseases, and other miracles, to the ‘truth’ of which many devotees testified by the numerous *ex voto*, votive offerings, in rural cha-pels.⁸² And some folk religious beliefs and practice remained unnoticed. An example is the fine weather, despite dire weather forecasts, my parents-in-law enjoyed at the 50th anniversary of their marriage in 1981. Upon her daughters asking their mother: “Mum, did you take a sausage to the [Clarite] convent?”, she responded: “No, I tidied the grave of our First Wimke”, her first born son. He had died six weeks after his birth but had remained part of this family ever since.

Pre-canonical religion at times also served as a store house of ugly religious beliefs and practices for canonical religion. E.g., at the outset of the ‘witchcraft craze’ in Europe, ca. 1450-1700,⁸³ folk beliefs in witches and witchcraft were ‘canonized’ in 1487, with papal approval, as doctrine of the church in *Malleus Maleficarum*, ‘Hammer of the Evildoers’ [witches], by two Dominican friars, Kramer and Sprenger. By depicting witches as allies and servants of the

and have no missionary urge or inclination to claim that their beliefs about the unseen are correct. One is a member of them from birth till death without a confession of faith or conversion. Gombrich adds two more remarks. One is that ‘many western societies today have hardly any communal religion’. The other: however deeply community and soteriological religion differ analytically, ‘both kinds of religion may be supplied by what sees itself as a single [religious] system’ (Gombrich 1988: 27).

⁸¹ Cf. Van den Broek 1979: 14-19, 30-34, and *passim*

⁸² The *anathema*, votive offerings to the gods in the community religions of ancient Greece and Rome, were declared *anathema*, ‘cursed’ by the Christian church leaders and banned for church members on the pain of excommunication.

⁸³ Till the Salem witch trials, 1692-1693, in the British colony of Massachusetts in North America.

Devil, they defined ‘witchcraft’ as taking part in the religion of Satan and therefore as apostacy from the ‘true faith’. Witches, thereby, were declared heretics to be burned at the stake if they ‘confessed’ (after torture) to have taken part in witchcovens and on that title had been found guilty of witchcraft by the Inquisition or in the court of some lower lord or town.

If the attitude of the monotheist canonical religions Christianity and Islam towards the precanonical beliefs and practices of their nonliterate members was at first hostile but later accommodating, having themselves become more pluralist and pragmatic, that of Buddhism was open, tolerant and receptive to pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices from the very outset. As were the adoptive pre-canonical religions of the societies and states it ‘converted’ to (Mahayana and Vajrayana) Buddhism. No ‘conversion’ from pre-Buddhist religion to Buddhism was ever required, let alone enforced. Only insight into the cause of suffering was offered.

The standard procedure for this (condescending)⁸⁴ co-existence of Buddhism with pre-Buddhist folk and state religions is exemplified by the mission of the monk Mahinda (285-205 BCE) to Sri Lanka. Mahinda was the eldest son of King Ashoka (304-232), ruler of the Mauryan Empire from 268 to 232 BCE. After Ashoka had converted to Buddhism early in his reign, he convened the third Buddhist council in 250 BCE at his capital Pataliputra for again ‘reciting together’ the correct content of *dhamma* as contained in the Buddhist canonical *sutra* collections of Theravada Buddhism at that time, and for banning heretical versions of *dhamma*. After which Ashoka sent numerous monks as ambassadors to rulers of kingdoms far and wide to spread this *dhamma* in the Hellenic West, and throughout India and South-East Asia.

He sent Mahinda to the kingdom of Anuradhapura on Sri Lanka at the invitation of king Devanampiya Tissa (247-207 BCE). Mahinda had by then been a Buddhist monk for many years and had reputedly attained the status of *arahat*, a monk that well versed in Buddhist scriptures that he was presumed to have gained insight into the causes of suffering and to have attained release from *samsara* already. Upon his arrival in the capital, he is reported to have preached *dhamma* that well to the king, his court, his people, and to the gods of the kingdom, that they all – the gods of the community religion of the Anuradhapura state included – ‘converted’ to Buddhism. Upon which these now ‘Buddhist’ gods of the Sri Lankan state religion were given ‘a place [as protectors of *dhamma*] within the [Buddhist/folk] pantheon. [Which practice of incorporating an earlier community religion] is not at all opposed to Buddhist teaching and has been used many times during Buddhist missionary activity’.⁸⁵ Pre-Buddhist folk religions and Buddhism have since then smoothly coexisted in many Buddhist societies in many parts of Asia and mutually influenced each other, with Buddhists viewing pre-Buddhist religious practices as the condonable, ‘natural’ side effect of *karma* that prolong *samsara* and can be overcome only in due time by conversion to *dhamma* in some future reincarnation.

Mahayana Buddhism also spread to China and Vietnam in the early 3rd century CE, and from China to Korea, and from them to Japan in the 7th century CE. From the outset Chinese Mahayana Buddhism was thoroughly sinized, for one reason because Buddhist scriptures were

⁸⁴ Cf. Dhammika 1993, *The Edicts of King Ashoka: The fourteen Kalinga Rock Edicts*, no. 9: “Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus:[17] In times of sickness, for the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of children, before embarking on a journey, on these and other occasions, people perform various ceremonies. Women in particular perform many vulgar and worthless ceremonies. These types of ceremonies can be performed by all means, but they bear little fruit. What does bear great fruit, however, is the ceremony of the Dhamma”.

⁸⁵ Cf. Kloppenborg 1979: 499-504, quotation at 501.

translated into Chinese by monks with a very poor command of the Chinese language and with the help of Taoist assistants; and because Taoists at first promoted it at the court of the Chinese emperor.⁸⁶ As a result, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism became one of China's three coequal *San Chiao*, 'three religions': Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Of these three, Confucianism undergirded the position of the emperor as 'Son of Heaven', *T'ien Tzu*, with a Mandate from Heaven, as well as the state bureaucracy, but had virtually no further religious beliefs and practices on offer.⁸⁷ Taoism filled this gap as a private, personal, ascetic, mystical, esoteric and syncretist⁸⁸ religion offering an 'elaborate range of techniques for the attainment of immortality, numerous religious feasts, a hierarchically structured organization', and millennialist promises, e.g. of an imminent paradise and a great peace, *T'ai P'ing*, that inspired several revolts of discontented farmers, such as that of the Yellow Turban in 184 BCE.⁸⁹ And Buddhism 'offer[ed] solace to [...] upper classes who were disappointed in Confucianism, as well as to the pauperized farmers.'⁹⁰ Both Taoism and Buddhism increasingly merged and in time proved a fertile source of many esoteric secret societies, such as the White Lotus cult of the end-time Buddha Maitreya, which in their turn became important sources and centers of armed resistance and revolution.⁹¹

In Japan too, there were never any hard and fast boundaries between the local folk religions of farmers and villagers, Shinto state religion, and immigrant Buddhism till 1868. Shinto, which centered on the goddess *Amaterasu* as the ancestress of the emperors, originated in the 7th century in competition with missionary Buddhism. It fused the cult of *Amaterasu* with elements of shamanic local folk religions, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.⁹² As early as the reign of emperor Shomu (701-756 CE), Buddhism was made 'to play its own part as state religion'.⁹³ Buddhist monks and nuns were in return exempted from civil rights and duties. But state officials were appointed to see to it that they spend their time for the welfare of the nation: in meditation, in reciting the *sutras* and the study of Buddhist scriptures, and prayer for peace; and that they abstain from astrology, the arts of war, and medical arts.⁹⁴ As Shinto gods were thought to have deep respect for Buddhism, even combined Shinto-Buddhist temples were built where Buddhist monks recited *sutras* to procure *bodhi*, enlightenment, for the gods.⁹⁵

In 1614, when Japan had gone into *sakoku*, maritime lockdown, to forestall being colonized by Spain, the government explicitly declared Japan to be the country of both *kami*, the Shinto gods, and *hotoke*, the Buddhas. And it forbade conversion to missionary Christianity on the pain of death. Which forced the *Hanarekirishitan*, 'the separated Christians', to go underground by building Buddhist temples for Kannon/Mary, and Shinto shrines for Hachiman/-

⁸⁶ Cf. Ransdorp (1979: 396) on this 'Taoist misunderstanding'.

⁸⁷ Ransdorp 1979: 388-394, 402, 410-412. "Confucianism had few religious values to offer at the level of personal experience". And "Confucianism is [...] a normative social-political doctrine in the direct service of the state. [Its] religious elements are, in fact, subservient to the socio-ethical role of Confucianism" (416).

⁸⁸ Which is reflected in *Daozang*, the canonical collection of Taoists scriptures, compiled under imperial auspices and approved in the Zhengtong reign (1436-1450 CE), close to 2000 years after *Daode jing*, The Way and its Power", Laozi's classic and the fundamental Taoist scripture.

Cf. Schipper & Verellen 2004: XIII-XIV

⁸⁹ Ransdorp 1979: 394-396

⁹⁰ Ransdorp 1979: 395, 403, 405, 407-409

⁹¹ Ransdorp 1979: 403, 405, 422

⁹² Cf. Kamstra 1979: 427-428, 430, 435-438

⁹³ Kamstra 1979: 439

⁹⁴ Kamstra 1979: 439-440.

⁹⁵ Kamstra 1979, 443

Christ, and by installing Buddhist and Shinto housealtars for them by wrapping them in kimonos and offering them riceballs.⁹⁶

In 1868, after USA naval aggression in 1853-1854 had forced Japan to give up its splendid isolation and made it embark on a course of rapid modernization after Western models, the centuries-long syncretic union of *kami* and *hotoke* was broken up by an imperial decree. Shinto and Buddhism were separated, with only Shinto being recognized as the established state religion of Japan. "All Buddhist statues, images and implements were to be removed from Shinto shrines".⁹⁷ Despite strong opposition, Shrine Shinto became Japan's State Religion (*jinja*) in 1882 whereas other Shinto sects had to register as *kyokai*, 'churches', as had Buddhism, Christianity, and any other religious communities.

In 1945, Japan secularized by thoroughly separating the state and Shrine Shinto, by abrogating its right to 'supervise' all 'churches', and by safeguarding religious freedom and property rights for all.

Post-canonical religion

In the past few centuries, almost all European societies, and more recently all societies worldwide, have entered a new, radically different period in the general history of human societies and religions. I term it the Second Axial Age. The dynamics of the current scale-up of technology, demography, institutionalization, prosperity, education, communication and mobility transform, more deeply than ever before, human societies and the minds of people. And they draw new, completely different demarcations in the religious field.

At the heart of (my analysis of) this process is de-elitization. Through general education, literacy, and social mobility, modern societies have, to a large degree, been de-elitized. As have also increasingly been the first Axial Age canonical religions and almost all new (mostly post-canonical) religions. Although de-elitization is yet far from complete due to neo-liberal capitalist free market mechanisms, it is massive compared to earlier *ancien régime* societies and canonical religions.⁹⁸ Basic formal education through schools is global now and available for every child virtually everywhere. Total literacy is a fact for almost all societies, or will soon be a fact, while the duration of education and the level of education are constantly and rapidly increasing everywhere. *Éducation permanente* is on the rise here and there. As formal training, it is still available to only a happy few, but as informal training it is constantly on offer for everyone in the continual stream of information provided by modern mass media. They inform people constantly and broadly about both their own and foreign societies, cultures and religions, albeit often superficially only.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Cf. Kamstra 1979: 445

⁹⁷ Kamstra 1979: 446

⁹⁸ I must enter here a *caveat*. My analysis is, I admit, a superficial, Western one. It is for the time being, based mainly on my analysis of developments in prosperous, powerful, capitalist societies. Developments may take different courses in due time in other parts of the world, especially if the current distribution of wealth is not corrected.

⁹⁹ Cf. Platvoet (2002: 122-123) on the transformation of Dutch society after WWII from 'a society divided into highly institutionalised, sharply bounded and opposed segments with authoritarian moral cultures' into, by 2000, 'a very prosperous, open, urbanising society with a great mobility, socio-structural as well as in terms of transport, and an exponential growth in information, communication, travel and tourism. It was also a secular, pluralist, fragmented, and permissive society with a liberal and pragmatic approach to pre-marital sex, abortion, the cohabitation of unmarried couples, and gay relations'.

As a result, social mobility has increased rapidly in the past few decades. It has caused class and rank by birth to disappear from modern societies but for a few anachronist expensive royal houses without political power.¹⁰⁰ The prosperity of the ‘lower classes’ of yesteryear has markedly increased, or is increasing rapidly, also in the so-called Third World. In politics, the separation of the three powers, though embattled and under duress or *pro forma* only, prevails all over the globe, with representative parliamentary democracy as central institution.¹⁰¹ The pressure on political leaders who do not respect ‘human rights’ is increasing.

Technology and natural science have not only contributed greatly to the dramatic (and climatologically disastrous) increase of prosperity of modern societies. They have also radically changed the worldview of many modern people, including many believers, by emphasizing and strengthening the opposition between ‘nature’, i.e. the natural or empirical world, and ‘the supernatural’, or the spiritual or meta-empirical world(s) postulated by religion(s). They deepened the gap between them by increasingly removing the spiritual from the material, and revelation from religion.¹⁰² Which gradually decreased the plausibility of numerous crucial ‘revelations’ for believers and atrophied beliefs in the presence and operation of the ‘unseen’ in the empirical world. As a result, most modern societies as well as the believers themselves have gradually secularized, with the meta-empirical getting gradually thinner and vaguer and more remote, and intercourse with it rare.

As a result, believers of canonical religions increasingly felt deprived emotionally of the ambiance of their former faith community: their ‘community religion’ that had coincided with their society in the recent past. In it, religion and the practice of religion and its devotions had been normal and natural, and factual irreligion was never noticed. Moreover, its believers are now increasingly confronted with a rapidly growing influential group of fellow human beings who respect (all) religion(s) and feel no need to fight or refute religion,¹⁰³ but lack themselves any emotional bond or intellectual need for religion and have defect silently but massively from their former religion.¹⁰⁴ As a result, the ever fewer faithful must now for the first time make - as in the sectarian time of origin of their religion - a conscious, critical choice for (their) religion: a ‘conversion’, but now not from another (‘reprehensible’) folk religion or idolatry, but to their own, radically re-doctrinalized religion with its shrinking congregations in the face of the ever more plausible irreligion of their secularized fellowmen. And so, a conversion to religion as such which for them too grows ever more implausible.

In addition, the attitudes to, and relationships with, other religions have changed, and are changing, rapidly in their own faith community, and in secular society. In part, this is the

¹⁰⁰ Except for the four Muslim absolute monarchies of Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Brunei; and the absolute monarchy of Eswatini (former Swaziland).

¹⁰¹ Even in major autocracies such as Russia and China, and in Muslim absolute monarchies, some semblance of parliamentary rule is maintained with (rigged) elections for a parliament and, Saudi Arabia excepted.

¹⁰² On this conceptual opposition, and the need for the spiritual to be perceived by believers as intra- and infra-empirical, and therefore as as empirical as the empirical and yet invisible, cf. Platvoet 2004: 193-194, and *passim*. Cf. also the famous modern misquote from Hamlet (scene V, lines 167-168): ‘There are more things BETWEEN heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ The text has: ‘There are more things IN heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy’.

¹⁰³ Religion(s) being non-verifiable, and therefore also non-falsifiable. Cf. above footnotes 22-24.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. e.g. Platvoet (2002: 123-125) on the fast and vast defection of Dutch Christians from the mainline Christian churches ‘turning the Netherlands from the most Christian nation of Europe in 1960 to the most unChristian one in 2000’.

result of the rapid religious pluralization of modern societies, mainly due to immigration. The distant religions of yesteryear of the colonies we once ruled now walk in our streets in the persons of their believers, build temples and mosques in our cities, invite contact, have airtime on radio and television; and their believers are met as neighbours, and as colleagues in the workplace, office and universities. And knowledge about them as they abroad, in their home countries, is increasing rapidly through education, tourism and media coverage, as is that about other cultures and religions worldwide.

An important consequence of this increase in encounter and knowledge of 'foreign' religions is that many believers of the canonical religions with a universal exclusive salvific claim have given up that claim as postulated by orthodoxy. They have replaced it personally as a believer, or as faith communities, with various theologies that attribute some salvific instrumentality to all religions other than their own. In addition, many modern believers visit the modern supermarket of the numerous esoteric, New Age, 'occult', gnostic, and other 'exotic' religious beliefs and practices that are currently commercially on offer in bookstores, libraries, and online, and in monasteries and temples abroad and at home.¹⁰⁵ There they fill their basket with some of them and compose their own, very private, exotic or reduced religion. Many others stop just short of irreligion by professing, if pressed, that they believe in Hamlet's 'something between heaven and earth'.¹⁰⁶ Or they de-transcendentalize and re-materialise 'God' by reducing him to love between fellowmen.¹⁰⁷

Through these processes of education, information, meeting and experimentation, the illiterate 'herd' of docile, barely literate common believers of the past, has already completely disappeared in many religious communities. And in others they are, if not in revolt, then adrift in directions that the literate religious elite of yesteryear can no longer control doctrinally nor disciplinary. Moreover, their herds are rapidly shrinking. In short, the believers, who used to be poor, illiterate and docile, are now, or will soon be, for the greater part, (a bit) prosperous, (sufficiently) educated, articulate, critical, assertive, autonomous and selective, and to a large extent have become (undercover) unbelievers. The basis of the power of the elite, which once shaped, managed, controlled and imposed the canonical religion on an obedient flock by means of scriptures with absolute disciplinary authority, seems to be disappearing quickly and forever. Moreover, a large part of that clerical elite contributes itself to this process. Having

¹⁰⁵ For a brief sketch of the characteristics of contemporary post-canonical religions, cf. Platvoet 1993: 242; and for a detailed treatment, see Hanegraaff 1996. It is striking that contemporary post-canonical religions are well versed in the history of religion and offer syntheses of it. They are tolerant and have reopened the revelation that the canonical religions had shut down, so that, like the pre-canonical religions, they are once again practicing continual revelation. Furthermore, like the pre-canonical religions, most (some excepted) do not have a sharply defined doctrines nor do they exercise religious discipline. They spread mainly through modern publication channels: the bookstore, the mailing, advertisements in door-to-door newspapers, and word-of-mouth advertising for expensive meditation weekends in a meditation center, preferably in the mountains or in a forests. The salvation they have on offer is aimed at mental support and success in this life and is strongly psychohygienic in kind. However, according to them, this will result in social reformations and eradicate war, poverty, discrimination, and environmental destruction. Despite these claims, these religions mainly present themselves as 'para-religions', a 'religion on the side', a 'additional religion', which one can freely practice alongside and while retaining one's Christian, Muslim or Buddhist religion.

¹⁰⁶ Which is not what Hamlet said. He said: 'There are more things IN heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Trouw*, *De Verdieping*, 20-6-2016, p.9: 'For me God is love. Love between human beings' (Arjan Visser quoting Hans Breukers, former keeper of the Dutch national football team).

been academically educated, well informed about other societies, cultures and religions, that part of the religious elite is thoroughly trained in literary-historical criticism of the canonical writings of its own religion and adheres to a range of predominantly liberal theologies. As a result, the outcome of their study of canonical scriptures is at odds with orthodox canonical religion. For the study of canonization is de-canonization.¹⁰⁸

'Seeds of destruction'

On the strength of the complex historical developments in modern times that have produced post-canonical religion(s) and a-religiosity, I argue that contemporary canonical religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, do not carry in them 'the seeds of their completion' in some future eschaton, as Fernhout expects on theological grounds for at least the Christian canon,¹⁰⁹ but rather the seeds of their destruction.¹¹⁰ Like all cultural-historical phenomena, religion is undergoing a radical transformation by scale-up of prosperity, education and communication which are profoundly changing its nature, for the second time, now by democratizing of the privileges and instruments of power of the former elites that created the canons of the past.

That does not mean that the age of canonical scripture is already closed or will soon close. Post-canonical religion, with its liberalism and criticism of Scripture, the growing numbers of a-religious members of modern societies, and the declining role of religion(s) in modern societies are experienced by a significant part of today's believers of canonical religions as a direct denial of, and an attack on, the very foundation of their faith which they cannot possibly give up. This provokes fierce reactions in them in the form of a further radicalization of the claims of their faiths, also regarding canonical texts. Not only would they be 'inerrant' and true from cover to cover, but they would also not contain any inaccuracy in any sense or phrase.¹¹¹ Some of these believers are the driving force behind militant reformist movements that achieve remarkable political successes.¹¹²

But the 'seeds of destruction' also work within canonical religions. The absolutization and radicalization of their texts is made possible in part by the education and training of their adherents in the many skills of the modern age, by their relative and increasing prosperity, and above all by their clever use of the most modern techniques of mass communication in the spread of their faiths. As are their political successes in mobilizing an electorate for their political objectives.¹¹³ These groups and organizations are also pre-eminently modern. They have either already taken full advantage of contemporary educational opportunities, increased prosperity and access to modern communication media. They also improved access to education, jobs, newspapers, TV and the internet for their relatively deprived electorate. In the respect of

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Vos 1997: 25, 32

¹⁰⁹ Fernhout (1994: 14-15) regards the 'special authority of the word of Jesus Christ [...] the seed of an entelechy by which the Christian canon will find its completion in the eschaton in the manner a plant grows from a seed and achieves its completion in its fruits' (cf. also Fernhout 1994: 8, 9, 279-282, 295-296, 301).

¹¹⁰ I borrow this paradoxical metaphor from the de-constructivist theologian M.C. Taylor who argues that every concept, that of 'canon' included, 'carries the seeds of its destruction within it'. Cf. also Vos (1998: 25, 32) on the study of canonization as de-canonization.

¹¹¹ Cf. Boele van Hensbroek a.o., 1991; and Van de Beek 1998

¹¹² Cf. Van der Veer 1994; Platvoet 1995c; Westerlund 1996

¹¹³ Cf. e.g. the electronic churches, and other evangelical churches in the USA and Nigeria (Hackett 1989: 194-200, 244ff., 275ff, 310-313).

the processes of relative de-elitization, their faith communities are just as modern, if not more modern, than those of the post-canonical believers (and the growing group of the non-believers).

My hypothesis, then, is that the 'seeds of destruction' have also been sown in the modern militant 'canonicratic' faith movements.¹¹⁴ The sooner and better they succeed in achieving their political goals, and achieve prosperity and all its modern adjuncts, the sooner the seeds of destruction will germinate and bear their de-canonizing fruit.¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁴ The Dutch *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Dutch Reformed Churches) founded by Abraham Kuyper in the secession – 'Doleantie' – from the Public (NH) church in 1886, and by Kuyper's successful introduction of political parties in the Dutch political system, have already completed this transition from canonicratic to canonic-sceptic religion; cf. Van Rooden 1996.

¹¹⁵ My approach to the comparative study of (religious) canons is also different not only from Fernhout's but also from the liberal theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1993). In his view, all religious canons are born from the 'nearly universal human sense for the transcendent' and all of equal value. He regards them as the sacrament of their encounter with the universe (Smith 1993: 15, 214, 219, 223-236, 239-294, 357sq.). Whereas Fernhout regards post-canonical religion as the massive a-religiosity that heralds the apocalyp for true believers, Smith is, both academically and theologically the perfect scriptocentrist. 'Holy scriptures' are in his view essential for men as *homo religiosus* and will function forever as the sacrament of the encounter of humanity and God. As a result, the canonical part of the general history of religions, is for Smith the complete religious history of mankind, from Neanthaler to now. Preliterate religions without Scriptures are completely beyond Smith's purview as primitive marginalia that need not be taken seriously.

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