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Jake C. Fischer

University of Puget Sound, jfischer@pugetsound.edu

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People Have Awareness of Their Participation
in the Construction of the Sacred

In response to Emile Durkheim's theories on religion in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religion*, Jonathan Z. Smith wrote his own book, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, where he calls Durkheim's theories a part of the greater "French classificatory tradition."¹ By "French classificatory tradition," Smith means a system of thought that looks at the ways in which people categorize the reality they see into discrete groups—the sacred and the profane — and how religious behavior as whole can be understood through the ways in which people participate in categorizing.² Smith sees the French method as a way understanding the sacred as something subjective, arbitrary, and constructed by humans. He contrasts this French understanding of religion with the what he calls the "German" understanding which sees the sacred as something innate or inherent in things and views humans as those who experience the sacred rather than create it.³ At the end of the essay, Smith provides readers with what he calls a "cautionary tale" which shows how these theories must be viewed in their broader context so as to understand their impact on the study of religion, pointing out how they can blindside scholars studying religion from other cultures.⁴

The cautionary tale that Smith introduces provides details on the field work of anthropologist Colin M. Turnbull studying the Pygmies, a group in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Turnbull observed that while performing a ritual, a group of Pygmy men went into a forest to find a *molimo*, or a sacred trumpet that is the "voice of the forest" and when they came back from the forest after having found the *molimo*, Turnbull was surprised to see that it was in fact a drain pipe and not an archaic pipe made from natural materials.⁵ When Turnbull questioned the men why they regarded this object as sacred, they responded by saying, "What does it matter what the molimo is made of?" (Smith, 112).⁶ Here Smith highlights how Turnbull's perhaps Germanic understanding of the sacred as something inherent in objects clouded his understanding of the ritual and he failed to see a critical element of the ritual he was studying: the participants of the ritual were aware of the classificatory behavior that they were partaking in.

One of the colonial influences on anthropology lurks in the understanding that European or Western anthropologists studying people from other cultures

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Topography of the Sacred," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 105.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 103.

⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 112.

know something about the behavior of the people for whom they are studying which the people themselves are not conscious of. In the case of Turnbull and the Pygmies, he considered himself aware of the fact that the Pygmies were doing religion and that they themselves were not aware of it. This example demonstrates quite the opposite: while the pygmies might not have a word for religion in their language, they seem fully aware that what they are doing is participating in a classificatory system of constructing sacred and profane elements, one of the natures of religious behavior itself.

Part of this colonial influence in anthropology comes from the coinage of the word religion, a product of the western Enlightenment and the ideals of a separation of church and state and religious from secular. In many languages, the word religion does not exist or was inserted into the language by western colonists.⁷ As Smith might say, central to the word religion is this notion that certain behaviors can be separated from others as being religious while other behaviours as secular in nature. While we can clearly see how this distinction is imagined through the creation of the word religion, that is not to say that others who do not have this word are not also reflective on this behavior that they are participating in. Despite Turnbull's assumptions, the Pygmies were aware of the ways in which they negotiated the boundaries of the sacred and profane.

In providing the example of Turnbull and his study of the Pygmies, Smith allows for us as readers to take a step back from the word religion and consider the ways in which the West has its own culturally constructed understanding of the behavior we call religion. While Western societies may have a distinct word for this specific behavior among the set of many human behaviors, they do not hold a monopoly on the self-conscious examination of this behavior, and to claim that they do would be to contribute to the colonialist power structure that assumes the enlightenment of the colonizers and the ignorance of the colonized subjects. As the influential French philosopher Michel Foucault might say, the creation of the word religion suggests some knowledge and thus power that the colonizers have over the colonized subjects.⁸ To move away from the longstanding colonial forces today, scholars of religion and anthropology must continue to recognize how the word religion was created by the West for the purposes of exerting power over those it wished to colonize.

⁷ Thomas Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 30.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 25.

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