

Borrowings go Round and Round. Transcending Borders and Religious Flexibility

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‘Siberian hunters have never been able to get used to our insistence on pressing our God on everyone else, nor to our way of abasing ourselves before him when they see us as masters of all – conquering the bear and the elk with our rifles, using our knowledge and power to conquer the indigenous people, who have always been determined to hang on to what little they have. How crazy the shaman would be to put his penny in the collection during mass without knowing whether it would be effective or not, whether the ritual would “work” this time – since only the result, here and now, matters to him. Why thank the priest and his God, why let them prosper, when in the end the famine did take hold and the sick did die?’

Roberte N. Hamayon¹

The strange export of religion

We have grown accustomed to seeing religions spreading around the world, apparently regardless of national borders, and attracting followers from everywhere on their never-ending way. But it is not inevitable that we should feel the need to disseminate our local truth beyond our homeland, and not all cultures share this need. Sadly, we have long labelled as popular, primitive, even superstitious, religions or religious practices that were quite happy to stay at home and felt no need to travel abroad. In relation to these differing cultural, political and universalist ambitions, religions with an oral tradition that have not spread outside their territory of origin, such as shamanism and animism, have come into conflict throughout history with those with a written tradition, like Confucianism or Judaism, whose exportation has had political repercussions, or Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, which were also attempting to proselytize.

Roberte Hamayon notes that a shaman cannot understand how his gods could be of use to everyone, and cannot want them to. First of all, he would say to a Christian, ‘we do not have the same ancestors as you, so each has his own gods! Neither can be passed from one people to another. Ours have a keen sense of kinship, they would have no interest in strangers like you. So why try to persuade us that yours could be of any use to us.’² Daniel Dubuisson reminds us that the decision to evangelize the pagans was St Paul’s. Never before had anyone thought of preaching a world view outside the home community. It would probably not have produced any results, had it not been for the network

of contacts set up by the Hellenized Jewish diaspora and the dispute between St Paul and orthodox Jews, which justified the break and the autonomy the new Christians subsequently claimed.³

Adopting the foreign model in order to make local improvements

When you break with your tradition, and so inevitably with your ancestors' beliefs, and when you proclaim another truth, that indeed justifies the need to convince others and links up with the idea of modernity, with all it implies for individuals as regards abandoning their roots and assuming power. Apart from the enforced adoption of religion when a country has been colonized, it has perhaps been no coincidence that peoples hungry for economic or political change, or for modernization, have welcomed one of the travelling religions, even if pockets of resistance have always persisted during the process of adoption. There have been many examples in the Far East, Africa and South America.

Thus the success of Christianity in Korea was largely the result of the political and social innovations it offered. The arrival of Catholicism in the country is a quite outstanding case in the annals of modern missions. The Church began in the late eighteenth century without the intervention of missionaries, the only medium being Christian books that the king of Korea's ambassadors brought back from Peking. At that time Confucianism was the country's main philosophico-religious system. It had imposed a strict social stratification which excluded women and relegated them to the home. A small number of noble families dominated the political arena; but they saw their power diminish as agricultural techniques – particularly for transplanting rice – developed and meant that production could be intensified, giving rise to a new class of landowners composed of farmers who had grown rich by increasing production. At that point relations between nobles and commoners underwent a significant change towards a class structure based on economic criteria. The Confucian system adopted by the Yi dynasty (1392–1910) began to be questioned and another more egalitarian social model was sought. This was when certain Korean nobles became interested in the Western books that had been obtained in China and they discovered Catholicism. They noted the egalitarian basis of Christianity and hoped to find a way to rectify the oligarchic nature of political power. They founded churches and appointed priests without asking for assistance or even informing the bishop of Peking. When he found out about this hybrid institution, he reacted violently, terrifying those in power, and everything fell apart after a long period of persecution. A century later Protestantism came to Korea and struck a chord with its people by appealing this time to their social aspirations. Hospitals and schools were built by Protestant missionaries and Korean women owe to them the foundation of the country's first women's university. Investment in the social field was accompanied by investment in the economy, in particular through contracts with the countries the missionaries came from.⁴

This type of adoption can be found in many countries. In her article in this volume Susana Andrade notes that Protestantism's entry strategy for Ecuador was to build free schools and hospitals and to foster new social links where mass urbanization was destroying traditional family structures.

The foreign model remodelled to suit the importing country

Despite the social and political influence of travelling religions upon the countries where they spread until they sometimes become the only official religion, we must not forget that if they wish to reach the mass of the people, they need to adapt. The story of Christianity in Africa is instructive: its intolerance to and inability for adaptation to local culture long hindered its advance. Indeed Doudou Diène expresses amazement at the fact that the Vatican tried to insist on organ or piano music in the depths of the Congolese jungle. Africans' reaction to the indifference shown by religious colonizers to their culture is equally surprising. Abel Kouvouama demonstrates how certain groups appropriated Christianity and transformed it into a 'religion for black people', recognizing only 'black saints' and refusing to acknowledge the colonizers' saints. No doubt this was another way of restoring their ancestors to their rightful place and not accepting foreigners' antecedents. Doudou Diène notes that Islam was able to spread more rapidly precisely because it managed to intermingle with African culture and make use of the common ground that brought them together. This meant that devotees did not have to make any distinction between African spiritual traditions and Islam. It is sometimes hard, in certain Sufi practices, to separate what comes from the African cultural heritage from what is strictly Muslim.

When the invading religion is prepared to compromise, it may be so transformed that it becomes unrecognizable. The case of Buddhism in Japan is an excellent example. Japanese religious customs are described as pragmatic, basically preoccupied with a positive interpretation of the world of the here and now. Thus the *kami* (divinities) of Shintoism form a hierarchy that depends on an assessment of the contribution each one makes to human happiness; folk religion emphasizes rituals whose purpose is to obtain tangible results, immediate, concrete benefits in this life. So Buddhism managed to make itself acceptable to ordinary people only when it stressed its magical aspect, which were expressed, for example, through recitation of the *sutras* (verses) to obtain worldly things. In this way Buddhism underwent a profound transformation, one might even say a reversal. Indeed it arrived armed with a transcendent principle and a negative view of the world that the Japanese could not understand, but it only succeeded in taking root in Japan when Buddha was seen as a sort of foreign *kami*. This process of assimilation of Buddhism with Shintoism took place in large part in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) with the appearance of the founders of Japanese Buddhism, who are still venerated today, such as Honen (pure earth sect), Shinran (true pure earth sect), Dôgen (*zen* sect) and Nichiren (Lotus *sutra* sect, from which the world-famous *soka gakkai* sect claimed until recently to descend). Nichiren (1222–1282) believed that Lotus *sutra* contained the Buddha's definitive teaching on *nirvana*. One had only to chant *Namu myôhō rengekiô* (adoration of the Lotus *sutra*) to invoke the miraculous power concentrated in this *sutra's* name and attain *nirvana*. This was an extreme simplification of the Buddha's beliefs and practices focused entirely, like those of Shintoism, on entry into a better life in this world.⁵ Hung-Youn Cho also shows in this volume how the shamanic legends of Korea have elaborated on the Buddhist imaginary.

Similarly the transformations Catholicism has undergone in Latin America have meant that it has ensured the continuity of the indigenous world of ancestors, so much so that it

has come to symbolize national identity. This same continuity may be found in the region's Pentecostalist groups because of the 'flexibility' of their doctrine, which is responsible for their current success.⁶ The perception of the Virgin has also merged with the pre-Hispanic Indian divinity Tonanzin. Thus the indigenous peoples' ancestral beliefs survive in the heart of the Church.⁷ According to Susana Andrade, in Ecuador there was a 'complex process of symbolic transfer' between the Catholic saints and virgins and the Andean gods.

Oral tradition: religions like sponges

On the other hand, local religions, known as popular or folk religions, have no option but to allow the so-called great religions to infiltrate them. They accept change especially easily, since theirs are oral traditions that are by definition very adaptable. So they can add a divinity here, a spirit or an ancestor there without any difficulty. Thus the Siberian shamans studied by Roberte Hamayon found it quite acceptable to 'adopt Nicholas, Elijah and a few other saints, particularly martyrs, who seemed the most frustrated and so the most dangerous: because of this they might become the most powerful, the most useful'. And so they widened their ritual practices to include these saints, hoping to attract 'their favour, their special protection'.⁸

Galit Hasan-Rokem's article also shows how local religions in Israel were 'forced into compromise with the religious forms seen as revealed and sacred', that is, with Islam and Christianity as well as Judaism. One of the best-known South Asian movements, that of Sai Baba, which is described here by Smriti Srinivas, is acknowledged by Muslims (in particular certain Sufi brotherhoods) as well as Hindus, since it borrows elements from both traditions. This dual recognition came to a climax when the founder died and Muslims and Hindus wished to bury their saint in different places. In yet another area, Haim Zafrani demonstrates how Jews and Muslims are bound together by popular culture and literature. But the example that Zaim Kenchelaoui presents is even more striking and unusual. The Yezedis, the 'people of the word' that he describes, perform an amazing juggling act with each of the religions of the book that they meet on their travels, so much so that the scholar is at a complete loss to attempt a definition, which is always too limiting. He reports that they make use of figures borrowed from other religions and may identify a 'Christian apostle with a Muslim saint' and make him their own prophet? Such a personal use of others' sources very often causes annoyance among the religions they are borrowed from. They cannot decide whether to treat the Yezedis as dissident heretics or as an entirely separate religion. The Yezedis' uneasy status has often caused them to be persecuted. Indeed, although the intrusion of indigenous elements into the so-called 'great' religions is clearly a matter of complete indifference to local religions, accustomed as they are to adaptability and change, this is not the case with the great religions themselves. They react quickly as though their continuity is threatened by these willy-nilly borrowings and allow some of their protectors to get away. This is probably one of the reasons why forms of shamanism and animism have been widely stigmatized as superstition by the invading religions. And it also explains why conversion to Protestantism in Ecuador meant 'negation of the past, of the power and protection of the gods', as Susana Andrade writes. So it is of course understandable that local traditions should have tried to resist

the invasion and that, as she goes on to say, 'crop failure and lack of rain' should be blamed 'on the new converts'.

A trick of history or the revenge of oral tradition

Throughout history we see societies tending towards increasing centralization of power, which favoured the spread of the religions where the written word dominated: it was dogmatic religions with transcendent aims that travelled abroad, while the pragmatism and immanence of practices of oral transmission facilitated the adaptation of dogma in strange lands. So, until quite recently, many countries in Asia, Africa and South America received foreign religions according to their political and social needs, and adapted them to their own traditions, which they attempted to preserve. The West was a virtually unchallenged model and one that was resistant to 'exotic' influences. But in recent times, because of the individualism that modernity has given rise to, the globalization of cultural and economic exchanges, and the privatization of the sphere of meaning, which is transformed into the goal of a personal search, there has developed a spirit of counter-culture that involves a wholesale rejection of any notion of institution, any form of transcendent ideology. The great religious systems that used to provide meaning and give societies and individuals codes of rules and references for their everyday lives have been demoted in value. They have lost the influence they once had.⁹ As a consequence truth was no longer given once and once only to a society as a whole. It became what worked for the individual and no longer had any universalist pretensions. Pragmatism had triumphed. Since that moment we have been in the era of the 'relative', that is the 'realization that no one (and least of all oneself) possesses the truth. Which does not mean that truth does not exist. It simply (humbly) means that no one has it.'¹⁰ The West, which evolved under the aegis of transcendental dogmatic religions focused on the afterlife, now claims efficiency and pragmatism as its watchwords and declares a clear interest in the here and now with its oral customs, which now appear radically modern. Seers, marabouts and other types of fortune-tellers now have their place and we are approaching the situation described in this collection by Wolfgang Wackernagel: 'where once it was heresy to believe in the occult and the power of witchcraft, now it is heresy to deny their existence'.

The tables have been deservedly turned, and since the 1960s the reworking which local customs have performed on the religions of the written word has come into the spotlight on the international stage, where for centuries it had merely satisfied local, non-Western needs. The resulting product of this transformation has been exported and now attracts a number of Westerners, who use it to construct an individual identity for themselves that is transnational and transcultural.

The case of Pentecostalism is a prime example of the way borrowing circulates. The Pentecostal movement, which appeared in the early twentieth century in the United States, was based around a particular spiritual and emotional experience: glossolalia and the group of gifts (prophecy, healing, etc.) that accompany baptism in the Spirit and establish a personal dialogue between God and his creature. Over time this movement has demonstrated a remarkable adaptability, infiltrating Protestant Churches and spreading independently, including, more recently, into the Catholic Church. This ability, which is attributable precisely to the emphasis given to the oral dimension of religious practice,

has meant that it has spread into the different social classes and throughout the world, each time responding to different situations and needs. Pentecostalism has managed to adjust to an ethnic group such as the Gypsies and helps to reaffirm their specificity. It has succeeded in attracting people in Latin America, in certain African countries and as far as Korea. Pentecostalism travels so widely that it is hard to tell where its missionary activity originates from. Wherever it goes, it acquires such specific characteristics that it is impossible to define the movement, except in its pragmatic aspect; that is, the immediacy of the relationship to the divine, which is expressed through visible signs that the Christian is chosen and through the emotional dimension of religious practice. It is this pragmatism, this trendy and opportunistic side of Pentecostalism, that is the characteristic feature of its adaptation to the spirit of modernity. Pragmatic, magical, focused on this life, eager to offer wealth, health and instant happiness, these features of Pentecostalism are strangely reminiscent of the values of Shintoism, shamanism or animism that are suddenly at the centre of international religious modernity. It is no surprise that the groups who come from those traditions have so enthusiastically taken this Christian movement to their bosoms and founded the largest Pentecostal Churches. One of them is in Seoul, the Church of the Full Gospel, founded in the 1950s by the Korean Cho Yonggi, who is today known throughout the world and thought of in many places as a prophet. Highly emotional ritual practices (where people weep, call out, sing in unison, believing themselves to be filled with the Holy Ghost), a positive attitude to the world (people pray for an increase in pay, a finer house, good health and a united family), the absence of transcendence from the relationship the founder and his followers have with Jesus (indeed people believe they can communicate directly with him, and in any case they have very little interest in a distant God), these are all elements borrowed from the roots of Korean shamanism, elements that are attractive to Westerners who are now disillusioned and have no more absolute truth to offer. Thus the Pentecostal Church of the Full Gospel is exported world-wide, robbing Westerners of their role as sole missionaries and even robbing them of Christianity itself, since they have discovered and adopted the transformed version.¹¹

Whereas Christianity is turned completely upside down by Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on happiness in this life and clear lack of interest in a supposed paradise in the afterlife, the use Westerners make of Sufism sometimes conceals its intrinsic link to Islam. In his article Thierry Zarcone explains that Westerners' conversion to Sufism results from a desire to rediscover Christianity's 'lost or diverted oral tradition' and does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a knowledge of Islam and the Koran. Thus there may be confusion or 'interference between the oral tradition of Sufism and Christian esoteric tradition'. In Buddhism as well, *zen* or the *soka gakkai* sect, which are adapted Japanese versions, are seen as pure forms of Buddhism by many Western converts, who practise them without necessarily being acquainted with Buddhist texts. In this respect Frédéric Lenoir's article demonstrates very well the complex nature of the relationship between oral and written traditions. Although Buddhism aroused intellectual curiosity up to the beginning of the twentieth century because of the rationality its texts inspired, from the 1960s this interest has undergone a radical transformation to become a 'mind-body technique' aimed at physical and mental well-being. The texts were ignored and direct oral transmission by spiritual masters became all-important. Transcendence and written texts, or pragmatism and oral tradition, is what distinguishes the two types of transmission. In this relationship

between oral and written, it should not be thought that the 'written' religions have no oral practices (we are well aware of the role of preachers in Protestantism in particular) or that 'spoken' religions have no books. (Zaim Khenchelaoui mentions the two hidden books of the Yezedis, whose rejection of writing is so complete that they are illiterate. In addition Cho Hung-Youn's work analyses the legends of Korean shamanism, whose written heritage has been found by a Buddhist monk to go back to the twelfth century.) Still, according to whether religious legitimacy comes down through the master, his actions and words, or through texts, the relationship to the world is transformed: in the former case it is pragmatic and focused on immediate well-being, and in the latter it is transcendent and more attuned to what happens after death.

Sufism in the case of Islam, *zen* or *soka gakkai* for Buddhism, various Pentecostal or messianic movements for Christianity, demonstrate the new links that are being forged between written religions and oral traditions, when the hybrid forms they create know no boundaries. They bear witness to the transformations these new-style exchanges and exports can lead to, returning to ancestral traditions that have been influenced by others' traditions and then venturing out again. But the triumph of the spoken word is even more far-reaching. It is also the intrinsic consequence of technological progress. Indeed Jacques Gutwirth notes in his article that the West gradually moved from the centrality of the spoken word to that of the written word with Gutenberg's invention of printing.

And now history is having the last laugh as we come back again to the centrality of the spoken word with the invention of radio and television. At the leading edge of modernity the tele-evangelists, those TV professionals, offer a new relationship to the religious, one which is spoken but private and involves both religious and profane practices.

Today religions are transnational and transcultural, spreading throughout the world in all their many guises. Although recent centuries have seen the extension of the written, universalist forms of religions, their oral forms, with all the emotions and experiments they give rise to, are today demonstrating their amazing ability to make a place for themselves in the landscape of our modern, so-called rationalized societies. Now, when openness is one of the magic words that gives us access to modernity, it seems as though individuals will no longer agree to be hedged in by dogmas that are written in stone for all eternity. And so the spoken word appears to be the most effective way to give texts the freedom we require and to allow each of us to approach them without constraint and within an infinite adaptability. In our rationalized societies religion seems to be taking on a capricious character. We play with beliefs, adopt them and abandon them, as we go on our way as individuals or as societies. And above all else we keep adjusting them so that the borrowed article never stays the same. It changes as it is exchanged.

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(translated from the French by Jean Burrell)

Notes

1. Robert N. Hamayon, *L'éternel retour du chacun pour soi chamannique*. Fable, pp. 82–91. We would particularly like to thank Roberte Hamon for the ideas she contributed to this issue and to place on record that the first part of the title for this introduction was suggested by her.

2. Ibid., p. 84. We should stress here that the expression 'each has his own gods' should be understood as meaning 'each has his own spirits'. Indeed there is no transcendent god with unlimited power but rather powerless spirits equal to human beings. This lack of power is the basic reason for the absence of political centralization in shamanic societies.
3. Daniel Dubuisson (1998), *L'Occident et la religion. Mythes, science et idéologie* (Paris, Editions Complexe).
4. This topic is expanded in my book (1997), *Le salut par le foot. Une ethnologue chez le messie coréen* (Geneva, Labor et Fides).
5. In this connection see the volume edited by Noriyoshi Tamaru and David Reid (1996), *Religion in Japanese Culture. Where Living Traditions meet a Changing World* (Tokyo, Kodansha International).
6. Jean-Pierre Bastian (1997), *La mutación religiosa de América Latina: para una sociología del cambio social en la modernidad periférica* (Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica).
7. Christian Parker (1996), *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America. A Different Logic* (New York, Maryknoll, Orbis Books).
8. Roberte N. Hamayon, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
9. As noted by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, cited in Nathalie Luca and Frédéric Lenoir (1998), *Sectes, mensonges et idéaux* (Paris, Bayard), p. 94.
10. Patrick Michel (1994), *Politique et religion: la grande mutation* (Paris, Albin Michel), p. 154.
11. See the author's article on 'Pentecostalism in Korea' (1999) in *Les Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions*, no. 105, January-March.