

## *Introduction*

In Madakada Āranya, a forest monastery some two hours' drive from Colombo, a skeleton hangs from a hook in a small hut. This is the focus of a particular form of Buddhist meditation. The monk walks through sunlight towards a black square of a window, and as he approaches he will begin to see the skull emerge from the gloom and then the entire skeleton, suspended in the heat. What is the monk being invited to perceive? Reality. Not the horror of death but the horror of life that it should be so fleeting. Held in that window is a vision of the inherent suffering of the mundane world in which we all required to dwell; as such it also represents a denial of the ultimate significance of politics. Yet, such visions came to colonise the world, not despite politics, but through it.

A handful of religious systems now dominates our planet: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism account for the vast majority of the religiously affiliated, while Judaism, Sikhism, and Jainism mop up a far smaller number.<sup>1</sup> Survey takers must then find a name for a forlorn category of the residuum: adherents of 'folk religions', which as of 2015 made up only 5.7 per cent of the world's population. Thus the countless, nameless traditions of ritual performance and mythic elaboration that lay outside the world religions, and that provided the distinct habitats of meaning in which humanity lived for most of its history, have been subject to a merciless winnowing. Profound religious diversity has given way to a weaker form of variation playing out under the carapace of a few overarching traditions.

How did it happen? Perhaps, our first instinct would be to consider it a side effect of the movements of hard power. Christianity happened to hitch a ride on the Roman Empire before its demise, and after a long

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center 2017. Sikhism and Jainism are counted as 'other religions', 0.8 per cent, with Jews at 0.2 per cent. All the religions mentioned thus far could be classed as 'transcendentalist'.

incubation in Europe began to force its way into the outside world from 1492, flowing into the space carved out by Iberian steel in the Americas and subsequently into a world organised by the hegemony of the West. Islam, meanwhile, spread from Morocco to Afghanistan within a few generations of the revelations of its prophet through extremely rapid feats of conquest.

This takes us some way towards understanding the religious map of the world today – but not as far as one might think.<sup>2</sup> The Roman emperor Constantine was not forced by military pressure to become Christian, and barbarian Europe was subsequently converted through the essentially voluntary actions of its kings; across the other side of the world a thousand years later the peoples of much of Oceania also entered into Christianity in this way. Nothing suggests that the warring tribes of the Arabian Peninsula were set on world-transforming empire before the teachings of Muhammad himself transformed them. And in the second millennium, Islam tamed the superior military power of the Mongols and their warrior elite successors, and also spread into sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, largely through the conversion of princes, who received it from travelling scholars, holy men, and traders. Moreover, focusing on the two monotheisms ignores the earlier expansions of the Indic religions over Asia. Buddhism, for example, was carried by merchants and monks from South Asia along the silk roads into East Asia and across the Indian Ocean into Southeast Asia, finding patronage in the courts of kings and then, in many cases, coming to shape how those kings understood what kingship itself was for. Most of these transformations happened long before modern communications and transport technology shrank the globe.

Before receiving these new traditions, rulers and their subjects were already deeply invested in religious forms that shaped every aspect of their existence. From the start of history any substantial form of social cooperation – and therefore any concentration of political power – sought to draw upon religion to some extent. Wherever chiefs and kings emerged they did so with ritual responsibilities and claims. In some cases, they became quasi-divine beings, credited with powers to intercede with the highest supernatural forces ruling over human

<sup>2</sup> I will consider the issue of the relationship between military–political developments and religious change much more extensively in *Converting Kings*, referred to here as *CK*.

affairs, and personally exalted by the most elaborate forms of protocol. Still, they were prepared to give up these traditions for entirely new religious systems, which most of their subjects did not yet understand, and which in some ways transferred moral and religious authority to a formidable class of monastics, priests, or scholars.

How do we explain the victory of the named religions – which I refer to as ‘transcendentalisms’ – in the political sphere? Perhaps there were once ready answers to this question, relying on some assumption of inherent superiority for example, but in recent decades the premises they were built upon have been eroded or abandoned in much scholarship.<sup>3</sup> The recent rise of ‘global history’, however, has thrown down a gauntlet. If we are now invited to see the big picture in terms of shifts in economic capacity or the balance of power, or the global impact of disease or climate change – why not return also to the field of religion? To do so as a historian means learning from historical sociology, which has never abandoned the macro perspective, and also engaging with the findings of anthropology. This book exists at some intersection where these three disciplines meet.

It is not a global history in the sense of an attempt to tell a comprehensive story. It rather sets out to provide a means of understanding certain important features of religious change and the dynamics of its relationship with the political sphere on a global scale and over the very long term – but before the rise of modern nation states and secular political thought. It adopts a wide-ranging comparative perspective in order to help provide clarity to conceptual problems otherwise locked up in regional specialisms, and to identify particular patterns that might otherwise go unrecognised.

### **A Language of Religion**

‘Religion’ is notoriously difficult to define.<sup>4</sup> Although this book must avoid the deconstructionist effervescence of the last generation of scholarship insofar as it impedes global comparative analysis, there is at least one very good reason why ‘religion’ tends to defeat attempts at encapsulation: it strains to cover two distinct phenomena, which

<sup>3</sup> For an older approach, see Latourette 1939: 240.

<sup>4</sup> And has been much historicised of late, see Asad 1993; Stroumsa 2010; Josephson 2012: 16, 23; Nongbri 2013; Lambek 2013a: 1–6.

Chapter 1 is devoted to describing at length.<sup>5</sup> The first is the tendency to imagine that the world plays host to supernatural forces and beings with whom we must interact in order to flourish. These beings are ‘supernatural’ because scientific knowledge finds no place for them in its account of the natural world: they include ghosts, spirits, demons, ancestors, gods, and the indwelling inhabitants of totems, masks, fetishes, and features of the landscape. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins describes these beings as ‘metapersons’ because they have agency and motivation just as people have, but they are not present to the senses in the way that ordinary people are, and they usually possess a greater range of powers to effect their will.<sup>6</sup> Yet no society has lived without feeling these strange denizens moving amongst them; modernity has provided unusually congenial conditions for their eradication but has not yet succeeded. The fact that their presence has been so universally granted suggests that it has been driven by evolved features of human cognition – and indeed, when cognitive scientists refer to ‘religion’ this is normally what they mean.<sup>7</sup> To the extent that this disposition is concerned with such forces and beings as potentially present – or ‘immanent’ – in the world and influencing it for the good or ill of human society, it is referred to here as ‘immanentism’.

This may, however, seem unappealingly reductive as a general definition of ‘religion’. Is it not also to do with arriving at an understanding of ultimate truths about the nature and purpose of existence, truths that only became known to humankind at specific moments in history through the insight of extraordinary teachers, truths that some take to their hearts and others stubbornly reject? Isn’t religion precisely to do with what is *not* present in this plane of reality, with that escape from

<sup>5</sup> It follows from the discussion here that no one simple definition of ‘religion’ is likely to work comprehensively and ‘religion’ is used in this book as an umbrella term for both immanentist and transcendentalist forms. However, if it *must* be reduced to a single definition, perhaps the most satisfactory one is very old indeed: that dimension of life which pertains to interactions with supernatural forces and metapersons. Definitions that focus on its role in the production of meaning make religion difficult to distinguish from culture, and those that focus on the production of society make it difficult to distinguish from other central and special features of social life. Still, this definition (close to Spiro 1994: 197; Sharot 2001: 23) has problems too, and is not put to analytical work here. On definitional complexities: Saler 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The term was introduced in his Hocart lecture (2016) and in Graeber and Sahlins 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See Laidlaw and Whitehouse 2007: 8.

the world that we know as salvation? And does it not involve the scrutiny and refashioning of one's inner self, the exercise of compassion, the cultivation of ethical discipline, and the attainment of theological understanding? Does it not have to do with belief and belonging? In fact, all these properly belong to a second phenomenon: 'transcendentalism'.<sup>8</sup> From a certain oblique perspective, all the traditions which exhibit these traits may seem to have a vast absence at their heart: they push their conception of the sacred towards visions that are literally ineffable, transcending any capacity of the human mind to represent it. Their followers yearn to attain that state nonetheless: this is salvation.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to grasp that none of this is implied by the first and most basic definition of religion above; these traits are quite extraneous to immanentism, the default mode of human religiosity. It is no coincidence that the term 'religion' should have arisen in Western intellectual culture. For one reason why it requires mental labour to separate out the phenomenon of transcendentalism and immanentism is the particular way that monotheism has fused them together by connecting salvation to the worship of a metaperson. It is easier to see their distinctiveness from the viewpoint of Buddhism, the other great transcendentalist tradition this book dwells upon: 'Gods are nothing to do with religion,' a Sri Lankan monk once remarked to Richard Gombrich.<sup>10</sup> Particularly in the Theravada tradition, metapersons are scarcely relevant to the pursuit of enlightenment. Gods may be unusually powerful but they are strapped to the wheel of rebirth nonetheless: their lives will end and begin again in this vale of tears just as any other unenlightened being. This is why Buddhism is so often the gate-crasher at any premature celebration of religious taxonomy, and particularly difficult for cognitive scientists to come to terms with.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The term 'transcendentalism' has naturally been used in many different ways, e.g., Mandelbaum 1966; Lambek 2013a.

<sup>9</sup> In practice, however, salvation is normally conceived in terms of perfection and bliss.

<sup>10</sup> Gombrich 1971: 46.

<sup>11</sup> See Laidlaw 2007: 221–222. On closer inspection, Buddhism may be less anomalous than it may seem, because (1) in practice all Buddhist cosmologies and much Buddhist practice involve relations with metapersons; (2) even in Theravada Buddhism, these metapersons may be linked to the soteriological project in many ways (Holt 1991); and (3) there is a tendency for the Buddha

Before proceeding any further, a few of the terminological issues that have beset the field of religion must be addressed. All the core concepts used here are profoundly *etic* categories, as the definition of the term ‘supernatural’ above should have made plain.<sup>12</sup> The notion of the ‘supernatural’ has been problematised since at least Durkheim because it finds so little *emic* resonance in many societies: it only makes sense in a worldview structured by the revolutionary eruption of ‘naturalism’.<sup>13</sup> But, however uncomfortable it may be to acknowledge, this essentially secular and disenchanted vision remains the vantage point of nearly all scholarly enquiry.<sup>14</sup> The *emic* irrelevance of ‘supernatural’—no less than that of ‘religion’—to many societies is not only conceded here, but it is underlined as a ubiquitous feature of immanentism. However, this tells us little about the *etic* utility of these terms in undertaking cross-cultural comparison. Alternative concepts such as ‘supramundane’ or ‘suprahuman’ may sound a little less ‘folk’, but they are no more or less dualistic than ‘supernatural’.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, the notion of the ‘world religions’ has also fallen under a cloud. Nor is it preferred as a term here. ‘Transcendentalism’ is more precise in identifying a core feature—the ontological breach between a transcendentalist and mundane form of being—out of which many other features emerge. It does not take sheer size and expansiveness as fundamental criteria.<sup>16</sup> Religious traditions with

himself to be treated as a godlike being in popular worship (Pyysiäinen 2004: chapter 4).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Etic’ concepts are deployed for the purpose of analysis; they need not correspond to any ‘emic’ concepts, which are those deployed by the subjects of analysis themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Descola 2013a: 172–200, on naturalism. However, it may have a longer backstory ultimately reflecting the transcendentalist dimension of Christianity: consider Thomas Aquinas’s distinctions between the supernatural, preternatural, and natural in Daston 1991: 97; compare Taylor 2007: 542.

<sup>14</sup> Anthropology sometimes flirts with the demotion of disenchanted secularism, as with the more radical voices in the ontological turn (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) exploring an *emic* disruption of the *etic*. But very rarely does scholarship in history or anthropology explain religious phenomena in terms of the agency of the supernatural beings and forces that religion itself postulates. This would not count as ‘explanation’ as these disciplines currently construe it. This may change: Clossey et al. 2016.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Super/suprahuman’: Tweed 2006: 73; Riesebrodt 2010: xii.

<sup>16</sup> Bayly 2004: 332, distinguishes ‘world religions’ from nonexpansory traditions such as Sikhism, Judaism, and Orthodox Christianity; Stroumsa 2011: 153, on Judaism.

a transcendentalist element include Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam, and Sikhism, and there is considerable diversity here in how much each of these traditions has promoted proselytism at different points in their histories.

At the same time, the content of the conceptual dichotomy corresponds in important ways with categories developed by many generations of thinkers about religion using terms such as ‘textual’, ‘historic’, ‘salvific’, ‘world’ or ‘universal’ religions. Because the robust deployment of these related concepts has now fallen out of favour in certain areas of scholarship – particularly in history and anthropology, if not in sociology – it is important to distinguish, clarify, and nuance the transcendentalist/immanentist distinction in detail, which is what Chapter 1 sets out to do.

For example, it must be underlined that immanentism is a universal feature of religion, found in every society under the sun. Transcendentalism is not: it is rather the consequence of a series of intellectual revolutions that took place in particular parts of Eurasia in what has been called the ‘Axial Age’ of human history – the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, which is introduced below. But transcendentalism cannot exist by itself; it always exists in a push-me–pull-you relationship with immanentism.<sup>17</sup> Note: the reverse is not true. Immanentism has existed untroubled by transcendentalism for most of human history, and many generations of anthropological work in particular have given us a fine sense of what these religious systems looked like. It follows that the terms *transcendentalism* and *immanentism* are used in this book in two ways: as labels for a *whole tradition* (such as Buddhism) or to describe an *element* of a tradition. Using it in the latter sense works to disrupt categorisations of whole traditions, and provides an opportunity for properly historical analysis, given that we can watch the dialogue between transcendentalism and immanentism shift about and buffet the sphere of politics.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the taxonomy of whole traditions remains useful because it allows us to see that this dialogue only takes place within one kind of religious system.

In other related dichotomies, the systems that remain once world religions have been subtracted have been referred to as ‘pagan’, ‘primitive’, ‘primal’, ‘local’, ‘communal’, or ‘traditional’. These are all

<sup>17</sup> Compare Gauchet 1999: 46.      <sup>18</sup> See ‘An Unstable Synthesis’ in Chapter 1.

problematic terms for various reasons. They frequently imply a range of characteristics that are *not* part of the construct of ‘immanentism’, including relatively simple and undeveloped cosmologies, an absence of literacy, unorganised and indistinct priesthoods, the nonexistence of an intellectual class or prophetic voices, and a confinement to locality and landscape.

### **An Overview of the Book**

After Chapter 1 has established the fundamental framework for conceptualising religion, Chapter 2 undertakes to explain why religion was so prevalent as an integral dimension of state construction, absorbing the energies of warriors, chiefs, kings, and emperors. Much of the discussion in this chapter is in a universalist vein, as rulers everywhere looked to religion to secure both supernatural assistance and the social power that it generated so readily. The latter enabled rulers to establish their unique status, legitimise their position, and shape the feelings and behaviour of their subjects. The more ambitious they were in this regard, the more they sought to control or consolidate the religious field under their authority. However, the nature of the opportunities open to such rulers was shaped by whether the field was dominated by immanentist or transcendentalist traditions. The chapter also describes a political logic to the development of overarching ‘higher’ deities as a concomitant of expansive state building. This occurs frequently in immanentist settings and is therefore quite distinct from transcendentalism; however, there is an important affinity between the two dynamics. Where transcendentalist traditions arose and arrived they provided a compelling means of stepping outside and relativising the existing religious field in order to contain it within a higher narrative – with which the exercise of political authority may be equated. Over the longer term, however, transcendentalism bequeathed the potential for the religious field to seep away from central control by setting up a dialogue with a powerful class of clerisy (scholars, monks, priests) who were themselves prone to internal fragmentation.

Chapter 3 develops a set of concepts for understanding the phenomenon of sacred kingship, a major concern of early thinkers in anthropology, and the default form of political authority in the pre-modern world. After explaining why it should be such a confusing institution to



analyse, the chapter takes on a similar structure to the first chapter, first setting out what the immanentist mode of sacralising the king looked like ('divinised kingship') and then the transcendentalist mode ('righteous kingship') before looking at how and why the latter eagerly sought to appropriate and combine with the former. For some purposes, divinised kingship may in turn be broken down into 'heroic' and 'cosmic' forms. However, the chapter is concerned with dynamics as well as types. For example, there seems to be a tendency for the charismatic display of warrior kings in the heroic mode to give way to the ritualised expression of cosmic kingship, and this in turn may ossify into ceremonial isolation (the 'ritualisation trap'). Meanwhile, it becomes clear that emphatic claims to royal divinisation often accompany attempts to consolidate the religious sphere.

Chapter 4 begins by considering the mechanics of religious change under the conditions of immanentism, dwelling on its innovatory, open, and experimental qualities, which ensure that it operates to some extent according to an 'economy of ritual efficacy'. Focusing on moments in which ritual systems are abandoned and new ones adopted allows us to intervene in scholarly debates as to what ritual is for. But the question arises: how do transcendentalist traditions – here represented by Christianity – manage to gain any kind of advantage in this economy? Amongst several answers, I shall draw attention to the capacity of missionaries to wage spiritual warfare through iconoclasm. Still, at the point of its reception transcendentalism has often been received as a species of supercharged immanentism, giving rise to prophetic, millenarian, and cargo movements in every corner of the planet.

Described in this condensed manner, these theoretical chapters may sound like abstract exercises indeed. Yet, at every point, the ideas and models suggested here have been constructed as means of thinking through the complex realities described by the specialist literature in history and anthropology. The discussion is grounded in a broad range of empirical material, including the empires of Ancient Mesopotamia, Qin China, Rome, and Angkor; the conquering warrior leaders Aśoka, Alexander, Chinggis Khan, and Queen Njinga; prophets of nineteenth-century Central Africa and the modern Philippines; royal cults of human sacrifice in Dahomey, Mexico, and Tahiti; and encounters involving the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth-century Americas or fieldworkers amongst the highlands of Papua New Guinea in the 1960s.

The last two chapters of the book examine one of the most important ways in which transcendentalism actually spread: the conversion of rulers. This involves descending from more long-term, objective, and abstract assessments of the relationship between religion and politics to what rulers facing the decision of whether to convert might actually see on the ground or in the horizon of their imaginations. Here, the investigation is confined to the arrival of Christianity into immanentist societies. Much of the case study material is deliberately taken from the two ends of the temporal spectrum, where the nature of the evidence is most different: late antique and early medieval Europe from the conversion of Constantine (310s) to that of Vladimir of Rus (c. 988), and the conversion of the chiefs of Oceania from Pomare of Tahiti (1812) to Cakobau of Fiji (1854). There is no attempt here, then, to address the issue of what happened when Christianity encountered a society where a rival transcendentalism had already achieved hegemony – that is explored in the companion volume (*Converting Kings*) written alongside this one, where missionary encounters with royal courts in Japan and Thailand are considered. Only then does it become possible to arrive at an argument regarding the global patterns of ruler conversion to monotheism.<sup>19</sup> Nor does either volume consider what might be called ‘interschismatic’ ruler conversions, as between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam or Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity. These are fascinating in their own right but would appear to obey a quite different logic.<sup>20</sup>

After describing a threefold model of ruler conversions, and reflecting on the meaning of ‘conversion’ as an analytical tool, Chapter 5 argues for the recurrent importance of the empirical demonstration of immanent power in stimulating rulers to publicly commit to the new faith; with surprising regularity, this took the form of military victories and dramas of healing. Certain characteristics of immanentism also shaped how Christianity was able to undermine the authority of the

<sup>19</sup> *Converting Kings*, referred to here as *CK*.

<sup>20</sup> It would take much more analytical work to consider how and whether the princely conversions of Reformation Europe, for example, might be brought into the paradigms assembled here – a task for future work perhaps. One of the reasons why interschismatic conversions appear to obey a different logic is that they are contained within certain shared understandings of the touchstones of legitimacy: they concern movements towards supposedly superior versions of existing religious commitments.