

*The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.* By Tomoko Masuzawa. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 384 pages. \$47.50.

As the title of this book indicates, Tomoko Masuzawa is following a number of recent studies that have investigated the “invented” or “manufactured” character of religious “traditions.” What is common to these studies is that they are less interested in the adequacy of religious labels and classifications than they are in the logic and agendas behind the projects of classification. What is especially ambitious and impressive about Masuzawa’s book is her move beyond any one area or tradition to construct a genealogy of “world religions” as its own synthetic discourse. What allows her to do this is her conviction that the concept of world religions can best be understood within the context of European intellectual history, and that the construction of various traditions reflects the process by which “the West” has imagined others to construct an image of itself. She proceeds by tracking the change from a scheme in which religions were grouped into four categories (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and everyone else) to roughly a dozen discreet and independent world religions. Central to her argument is that the expansion of world religions was not a belated recognition or discovery of previously invisible traditions. Rather, the development of world religions as a scholarly category served a variety of rhetorical purposes that helped to buttress Christian hegemony and universalism.

Masuzawa’s analysis is especially suggestive when describing how portrayals of world religions developed in relation to each other in a kind of unified global puzzle in which different pieces were conceptually formulated to fit with each other. For example, casting Buddhism as a Protestant movement arising from within Hinduism endorsed an anti-Catholic suspicion of ritual, helped to denigrate the existing religious practices of India and the decayed Buddhism of East Asia, and

celebrated an Aryan racialism that could be favorably contrasted with the Semitic influences on Islam, Judaism, and most of what went wrong with European culture. Ultimately, Masuzawa describes her project as a mix of speed reading (through theoretical literature that has been largely forgotten) and close reading, although she is clearly more comfortable with the latter. In this regard, her close reading in the chapter on Max Müller is particularly strong whereas her attempts to make broader claims about the twentieth century toward the end of the book are admittedly uneven.

This book is bound to cause a great deal of defensiveness among those whose self-identified areas of specialization are cast as the products of European hegemony. But before dismissing Masuzawa, it is important to keep in mind that her use of the term “invention” does not imply that all communities, organizations, institutions, and traditions were the figments of European imagination. Rather, what was invented was a class of analogous and comparable world religions. In any case, Masuzawa anticipates that she will be the target of “historical-realist suspicion” of those who “may see their own professional practice precisely as a powerful antidote against pseudohistorical pronouncements, including those proffered by the overly literary, language obsessed, rhetorical analysts who are predisposed to the kind of intellectual activities described as ‘close reading.’” (31) This sounds about right. The historical-realist approach is rarely self-consciously identified as a particular theoretical or rhetorical stance. It is, rather, reflected in the actual practices that organize the fields and disciplinary distinctions that make up religious studies to the extent that scholars avow no agenda other than faithfully reconstructing religious traditions as they really are. Masuzawa’s book can be read as an extended critique of attempts to become passive amanuenses through whom religions speak for themselves. Identifying pluralism as a cover for universalism goes to the heart of this critique as it questions whether increased scholarly

attention to world religions is evidence for either empirical progress or a magnanimous embrace of religious diversity.

Masuzawa is most persuasive when reminding us that the logic of classification has its own history with its own politics. However, in a book about the latent theological and political agendas in the development of the study of religion, the author is curiously vague and evasive about her own theological and political agendas. In a telling statement about the motives behind her study, Masuzawa mentions: “To be sure, it is always more difficult to name what one’s objective is than to make a list of what it is not.” (10) Really? Always? For everyone? This may be the defensiveness of a penetrating critic who has gotten so good at undercutting stated objectives she has decided to forego the whole business. But what may haunt this stance can be found in a footnote on the same page, in which Masuzawa states that her project takes literally “the programmatic statement famously issued by Jonathan Z. Smith – though possibly with somewhat different motives and errant consequences than otherwise intended.” (10) For his part, Smith has little difficulty stating his objectives. Furthermore, what is the object of painstaking proof and analysis for Masuzawa is taken for granted by Smith as a starting point for analytical work. For Smith, the fact that scholars invent religions is an opportunity and invitation for scholarly imagination. The task of the scholar should be to make better, rather than worse, inventions. This poses an important problem for Masuzawa’s critique. While it is one thing to undercut those who believe that they are discovering the truth embedded in the world, it is less clear how she would respond to a pragmatic statement like: “Yes, scholars make up religions. So what?”

I am not saying that Masuzawa’s contribution is redundant or unnecessary. One key difference from Smith is that Masuzawa is addressing the political and cultural dimensions of scholarly interpretation in a way that might also critique those who see religion as their own definitional plaything. In this sense, Masuzawa might be unduly self-effacing when she

delimits her project to an intellectual history of Europe, as she does when she states in the preface that: “The reality of world religions today—that is, the stubborn facticity of these categories and the actual world that seems to conform to them in many ways—is obviously not of the European academy’s making, no matter how decisive its role.” (xiv) While this seems to be a reasonable disclaimer and may be a way of taking into account the observations of Talal Asad and others that arbitrary religious definitions give way to institutional and organizational entities that become new historical objects, it leaves an unresolved tension with the historical-realist account. In particular, it leaves open the possibility that the dozen world religions are admittedly imperfect and imprecise and may very well reflect the latent Christian biases of the people who created them, but are still the best possible classifications of religious data considering the enormity and complexity of the task. Clearly, Masuzawa thinks that this is not it. Against the argument for more historical precision as a corrective to Eurohegemony, she cites Walter Benjamin as a model for thinking in new ways about history. But what may get lost in the shuffle in Masuzawa’s pre-emptive strike against the historical-realists is that, in scholarly practice and method, her work resembles academic history far more than it is modeled after Benjamin’s history of photography, or his speculations on the origins of language, or his discussion of aura in modernity. There is a practical value to this, namely, that Masuzawa is able to be a professor at the University of Michigan instead of an unemployed academic like Benjamin. But what is missed is that part of the value of the Masuzawa’s book is that it provides what may be a relatively plausible, one might even say realistic, account of how the label “world religions” was assigned to a disparate collection of texts and practices. The difference with Smith, then, may be that she is far less comfortable with removing the category of religion from the discursive context in which it developed and that she pays greater attention to the historical and cultural baggage that may

complicate the scholar's ability to use religion for his or her purposes of comparison and generalization.

For this reason, separating discursive analysis from stubborn facticity may blunt the force of Masuzawa's critique if it provides an excuse to those who would opt for either side of the fence. If her argument makes sense, it is because it is not so easy to uncouple the real world from interpretations of religion. Masuzawa is particularly convincing when she demonstrates that imperialism was and is a problem, and has not gone away despite strategies to become more scientific, or more neutral, or more objective. To put it another way, intellectual history is about a lot more than intellectual history. Masuzawa needs to address how her claim to be limited to European intellectual history is substantially different from the historical-realist specialists who delimit their inquiry to only Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, or Christianity. After all, few contemporary scholars make the kind of broad and sweeping claims found in the nineteenth-century history of religions. The danger is that a likely response to Masuzawa's work could be to avoid the problem of world religions altogether by retreating to ever more narrowly defined areas of specialization.

My point here is not to trap her with the "So how can you do better" question that dismisses her insights until she can come up with her own set of new and improved world religions. Rather, I am convinced that she is not writing an intellectual history of Europe for the heck of it and that there must be some *reason* for her commitment to historical rigor, textual precision, and theoretical sophistication. In the end, Masuzawa makes a convincing case the scholars have played a significant role in defining world religions in the past. So have scholars stopped doing this? And if not, what kinds of agendas should they have?

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