

Title—The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism

Author—Tomoko Masuzawa

Year—2005

Categories: Religion, Theory, Eurocentrism, Intellectual

Place: The World (Europe)

Time: 1800-1940

Argument Synopsis:

Masuzawa's book attempts to problematize and deconstruct the concept of 'world religions.' The term itself is very ambiguous and belies an assumption that religion is a universal, or at least ubiquitous, phenomenon to be found anywhere in the world at any time in history. She claims that religion as a category has been left largely un-historicized, essentialized, and tacitly presumed immune or inherently resistant to critical analysis. Masuzawa highlights how the religions of the world are arranged by various systems of classifications; she notes groupings in three categories depending on the location of origin—Near East (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), South Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism), or Far East (Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto). 'Primitive religions,' such as shamanism or animism, are considered lesser and as such are always presented in lower case. She argues that these foundational categories are taken as truth in the vast majority of 'world religion' textbooks. Her book is primarily focused on the discourse on religions, not 'religion itself,' with a concerted focus on the nineteenth century. Masuzawa posits that the nineteenth century was the period in which the notion of religion came to acquire an overwhelming sense of objective reality and utter self-evidence.

During the nineteenth century, every region of the non-modern non-West was presumed to be thoroughly in the grip of religion. Each 'world' religion came to be recognized as a vast and powerful metaphysical system deeply ingrained in the social fabric of a particular nation. When religion came to be identified as such, it came to be recognized, above all, as something that was in the process of disappearing from Europe. She argues that the modern discourse on religion was from the beginning a discourse of secularization. She aims to provide a genealogy of 'world religions' as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy, which quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions other than the West. She traces the forces in nineteenth century European thought that resulted in the establishment of the idea of world religious traditions. Masuzawa posits that there was nothing inevitable about the expansion of the list of world religions and that despite the appearance of pluralism, Western values determined the outcome.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- In the nineteenth century, the endless speculation on the differences and similarities between religions continually provided opportunities for Europeans to work out the problem of their own identity and to develop various conceptions of the relations between the legacy of Christianity on one hand and modernity and rationality on the other
- The modern discourse on religion(s) was from the very beginning a discourse of secularization and at the time same a discourse of othering
- Calls for the discourse on religion(s) to be viewed as an essential component within the colonial discourse of orientalism