

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 19 September 2017

What Do We Mean by Indigenous Religion(s)?



Podcast with **Bjørn Ola Tafjord** and **Arkotong Longkumer**
(2 October 2017)

Interviewed by **David Robertson**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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[http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/what-do-we-mean-by-indigenous-religion\(s\)/](http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/what-do-we-mean-by-indigenous-religion(s)/)

David Robertson (DR): *We talk about the world religions paradigm a lot here on the Religious Studies Project. And one of the things we've pointed out, on several occasions, is that you've got the Big Five, or sometimes the Big Six, and it depends on who's editing the particular book what those are. But you'll often get these additional categories stuck on, you know: new religions and, increasingly, indigenous religions. And that's what we're here to talk about today. It's not always very clear what it is we're talking about when we talk about indigenous religions. To discuss that today we're joined by [Bjørn Ola Tafjord](#) of Tromsø University. Welcome back.*

Bjørn Ola Tafjord (BT): Thanks David.

DR: *And we're also joined by [Arkotong Longkumer](#) of the University of Edinburgh. His first time on the Project itself, although a long-term friend of the Project. So, welcome to you!*

Arkotong Longkumer (AL): Thank you.

DR: Let's start . . . Bjørn, you've talked about the idea of indigenous religions as a kind of language game. Maybe you could explain to us a little bit what you mean when you say that?

BT: I think it's interesting to look at how people use the phrase indigenous religions in different ways: how academics use it different ways to do different jobs in their different academic projects. I think it's interesting to see how non-academics use the phrase in order to do jobs in their different political

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social and cultural (whatever) projects. And, by paying attention to that, I think it becomes clear quite quickly that it's a phrase that is used in ways that vary a lot, and that this variation creates troubles sometimes – both for academicians and for others, in terms of understanding each other – but also, that these are creative processes that also open new possibilities both within research and explorations of different cases. But also in other projects, as non-academicians tap into the discourses of academicians.

DR: *And in some ways this whole conversation goes back to the earliest days of Religious Studies – doesn't it? – and the idea of classifying religions, full stop. You know, with [Tiele](#) and [Müller](#) and people like that. Because you can't have indigenous religion without this idea of religion itself, right?*

BT: I think one of the ways that Religious Studies scholars think about indigenous religion – often its the first way we think of it – is as a class of religion. So, all the rest: all the other religions than those that fit in the world religions paradigm. All the rest, when we take out also the “new religions” or the “popular religions”, or whatever we want to call that very varied group. So, yes. I think that has been one typical way of thinking about it. But it has always, it seems, been one of these categories that sits uncomfortably in the scheme of the discipline.

AL: Can I just add . . . ? What I think is interesting is that we're looking at indigenous peoples and how they actually practise religions. So I think that if we are to approach indigenous religions as a category and try to find that across, say, Africa, or in Asia, or in Latin America, then I think we might have a problem. Because there is no set paradigm of what indigenous religion is. And I think it varies according to context. So, I think what I'm interested in is how indigenous peoples understand or practise this thing called religion. So I think, in that sense, the category indigenous religions is not a primary factor. (5:00) It's something that comes out of us looking at indigenous peoples so, in that sense, I think it's slightly different from, say, the traditional scholar trying to find out what a kind of religion is.

DR: *That's an interesting point. Sometimes these kinds of categories do come out of a very good thing, in our attempt as scholars to more accurately represent what's going on. But, at the same time, we need to kind-of play the game of the field a little bit, in order for our work to fit in and be understood anywhere. Would you agree with that?*

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AL: Yes. And that presents us with several problems, I think. I think if we have an assumption of what indigenous religion is in the academic environment, then it's interesting also how that kind of understanding can play itself in the field. So, for example, much of my work is in the North East of India. And I'm interested in how the [Hindutva](#), or the Hindu Nationalists, co-opt this idea of indigenous religions, to actually include this fringe marginalised non-Christian or non-Muslim group into the fold of indigenous religions - by arguing that Hinduism is a kind of indigenous religion. So here, I think, we have a problem of how the academic term of indigenous religions is used quite effectively by the Hindu nationalists to propagate their idea of assimilation and inclusion.

DR: *Yes. And Hinduism is a really interesting case because when you have more, sort-of, formal academic attempts at presenting some sort of definition of what indigenous religion is – I mean [Jim Cox's definition](#) is probably the most commonly encountered nowadays – you immediately run into problems when you start trying to apply it. Because Hinduism is, by any of those categories really, an indigenous religion.*

BT: I think, often, it can be worthwhile to pay attention to the two different words in the phrase. That in some projects – in the typical projects of Religious Studies, where you try to classify religions – then the emphasis will almost always be on the latter word, on *religion*, and the adjective *indigenous* becomes a sort of classifier to say that this is a different religion: it's from the other classes of religions. But in many uses that are not part of religious studies – but also some of the uses that are part of religious studies – the emphasis can also be on the adjective. And then it's not about classifying religions, at least not primarily. Then it becomes one about classifying peoples, often, or other objects or things, that are seen as belonging to particular kinds of peoples. It becomes shorthand for indigenous peoples, so it becomes the religion of indigenous peoples. Which can be used both to sort-of create groups, and demand rights, and all these kinds of applications. But it can also be used to discriminate, of course: to talk about “we” and “the other” and to exclude

DR: *I think there is an implicit distinction that goes on with that sort of language game, though. I'll give you an example that I came across recently. In the undergrad course, here in Edinburgh, they're given the task of visiting the museum and describing religious objects. And we got to talking about the way that indigenous religious things were presented. And the example was given of a bolt with a painting of a sea deity on it, which was interpreted as a religious act.(10:00) And I said “Are we*

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maybe over-reading into that that 'it's obviously religion, because there are primitive people'? If a truck drove past you on the A9, in Scotland, and it had the St Andrew's Cross on the front of it, would we interpret that as a religious act by the truck driver, to ensure a safe journey?' It might be in some way, but it's also many other things. It's just a particular language that people do, and there are national uses to that symbol as well. But because it's in an exoticised, indigenous culture, we kind-of read religion in there in a different way. We assume this primitiveness. Would that be fair to say?

AL: Yes. I think part of the whole discourse of indigenous religions . . . I think there are a couple of challenges here. People who study indigenous peoples and their cultures and religions, I think, are trying to say to the academic world: "You have to take us seriously!" And I think, because of that, sometimes we classify ourselves as people who do indigenous religions in order to compete with the other kinds of religions out there. But in terms of actual engagement, in terms of research with people, we're not really trying to isolate categories out by saying, "This is a kind of religious act." Or, "This is a political act or an economic act." I think a lot of the people that we are working with tend to think about these categories in kind-of overlapping terms. So I think part of the challenge is – and I think what we as scholars have to do is – that we have to speak a certain kind of language in order to communicate our ideas. It could be in the classroom, you know, it could be in a conference, etc. But I think at the same time we are also trying to destabilise these categories, and I think that's where the challenge is. Because, to a certain extent, we are in a Western academic environment and of course we're also in Religious Studies, so we have to try and articulate that, but at the same time I think we have to be wary of the limitations of these categories. So the kind-of national, political and religious intertwine.

BT: I also think that – those of us who study what we commonly call indigenous religions in religious studies – I think one way that we might have something to contribute to the larger field is that most of us do fieldwork. Many who do other religions often go straight for the religion. If you do Islam you go straight for the Islam; if you do Christianity you go straight to study Christianity. Whereas when we do fieldwork we are forced to sit around a lot, and be *in* places. And one of the things we discover is that it's not all about religion all the time. Actually, religion happens, religion is an act that is done in different degrees and different ways, but in different circumstances. But I think it also makes us aware that religion is not around all the time. That's one way that we can be a group of scholars who remind the rest of the field about not exaggerating the importance of religion. We tend to send our students

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out in the world to find religion and of course they come back with religion. So the whole field exaggerates the importance of religion.

AL: And I think that also ties in the point about how primitiveness is often associated with how the people are so close to nature, and to Gods, and spirit, and all of that, right?

BT: Right

AL: And I think, to a large extent, that's not really the case. Because a lot of the indigenous peoples that we are working with have mobiles, wear jeans – you know – are engaged in social media. So, I mean, all of these practices are happening and I think that sometimes destabilises our notion of what indigenous peoples are. (15:00) So, this one thing that I'm kind-of working on is trying to understand festivals. And there's a festival that I've been researching a lot and its called the [Hornbill festival](#), which happens annually in Nagaland, which is the Indian state. What you often get is, the tourists that come from the West - say, primarily from Europe and North America – have a certain notion of what this festival is about. So it's about this indigenous subject who still dresses in their traditional clothes, or they're naked, or carry spears. And they have this visual image because this image has been passed on from the colonial times. And when they come to the festival they find out that "Oh! All of them are dressed like us!" And they carry mobile phones etc. So that kind of image, I think, is quite prevalent. And I wonder if, to a certain extent, that's what happens with our students: that they have a certain exotic image of what indigenous religions are, and if you don't give them that image then probably they say, "Oh well, it's not interesting is it?" So that's the challenge that we as scholars – and especially in indigenous religions – are trying to tackle, I think.

BT: There's also widespread assumptions that indigenous peoples have indigenous religions. And I think where I study, in Talamanca in Costa Rica, one of the things I was told and have been told repeatedly is that, "before the arrival of the Missionaries, before the Christians and the Baha'is came in the 1960s, we didn't have religion." And still the word "religion" is usually reserved to point at those traditions that came in the 1960s: various versions of Christianity and the Baha'i faith. And it's only recently that some of the younger generation there has started to talk about what they used to call "indigenous tradition". Now they've started to talk about it as an "indigenous religion". And those who do it most are those who have gone to university, who have probably learned from Religious

Studies scholars, or anthropologists, or others, that religion is something that exists everywhere, in all

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societies, at all times and that indigenous peoples have a certain kind of religion. And then they return home, or they turn their gaze towards their own community and start to translate indigenous traditions into indigenous religions. Which I think is quite interesting.

DR: *It's very interesting. And it's a very good example of why the conversations about how these categories operate is not just academic navel-gazing. These categories feed back into the world and have very real legal ramifications for people. They exist as legal entities, people begin to construct their own religious and ethnic identities around these categories that we've given them, basically. Yes. I wondered if you wanted to reflect on that, because indigenous religion is not only an academic religious category or a practitioner category but a legal, ethnic kind of category as well.*

AL: Yes. And I think that is happening increasingly. We had the case of the local indigenous religions, as it were – you could be in Africa, you could be in Asia, you could be in Latin America – but we're increasingly seeing the globalisation of indigenous religions as well. Especially if we are fighting for national identity, or sovereignty, or trying to safeguard ethnic identity within nation states. So the platform that really affords that kind of space is the United Nations and the [Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), which is advanced a lot by the UN. So, here you enter into another arena of how these terms are actually quite positive and quite useful and quite empowering as well. (20:00) And, I think, couched in that is the very important idea of human rights: that having any kind of indigenous identity is intrinsically related to human rights issues. And, of course, protecting your religion, your culture, your traditions, is also tied in with human rights. So in the kind-of broader global sense, the term indigenous, or the term indigenous religions has a lot of purchase.

BT: And in order to gain something from it you have to translate your traditions, your practices, your narratives into recognisable units, in order to be recognised as an indigenous people, or as an indigenous religion. You have to make it come across in a way that makes the judges in the courtroom – or whoever it is, the politicians that make the decisions – they have to recognise this as an indigenous religion or as indigenous people. And that sort-of forces actors also to play into these expectations that are floating around now.

AL: Yes. And I think to translate those kind of experiences, I think you tap into again, the academic and intellectual discourses out there on what exactly is culture, what exactly is heritage, or religion, or politics, and all of that. Yes, the cycle of the exchange of these ideas and categories are both local and

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global and they feed each other, I think.

DR: *A couple of maybe slightly more critical takes on that . . . I mean, one is that it's very interesting that in an increasingly globalised political system, that indigenous religion becomes one more aspect of an increasing sort of identity politics. So it's seeking national, religious, ethnic identity. You can also relate it to LGBT and all these different interest groups, rather than national representatives. But also there's the way that religion becomes one more card to play in power relations. So, whilst sometimes yes – absolutely, it does have to do with human rights, other times it's much more cynical. There's the case of the Canadian indigenous population who had no interest in promoting their practices as being an indigenous religion until an oil company wanted to drill there. At which point, by claiming indigenous status they were able to prevent the drilling from taking place, because the land was now seen as sacred by the UN, or protected, rather, by the UN. So that's a very good example of the sort of post-colonial legacy of this category of indigenous religion. It goes over to these other people who then use it in the same power plays which they've been gifted, if you like.*

BT: I also think that history has to be taken into account: the history of religions, not as a field of study, but as something in society. [Going] back to the Costa Rican context, for example: the power and the position of the Catholic Church, just a decade or two ago, was so strong they were able to dominate the discourse and to decide what was legitimate religion or not. I think the main reason why people have said “we have no religion” is to keep it away from missionaries who would say, “If you have an indigenous religion then that's superstition, or a false religion, or idolatry.” So maybe what has happened also in international politics in recent years is that some sorts of religions have lost their hegemonic position, whereas other kinds of religions have got more space. I certainly think that in the Costa Rican context there has been a pluralisation of the religious field. And as indigenous culture and indigenous peoples have gotten more attention, and they have been looked upon more positively from the outside, so has their religion. (25:00) So there's a sort of return of indigenous religion to the public sphere. Or, the rise of indigenous religions in the public sphere also has to do with the decline of the kind of discourse that before would immediately classify it as a superstition, or idolatry, or something that has to be fought, or primitive religion.

AL: Or even primal. So I mean, all of these academic terms like primitive, primal, superstitious . . . of course I think people are also trying to reclaim a kind of identity. And I think the whole question of

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identity politics is interesting. And of course identity politics exists and I think a lot of indigenous activists are also aware of that, and they take advantage of that. Because they're also making choices in the immediate present for their own communities against, say, exploitation, or oil drilling – which happens – or dam creations. So, they're trying to protect their land. They're also using these categories effectively and I think that's important. So it's not that all indigenous peoples are so close to nature and they're all aloof, and they're all having a great time. But also on the other hand, I think – as Bjørn was articulating – is that the term indigenous religions is also quite empowering. It's about reclaiming a kind of identity. And they're using the tools available. And there's nothing wrong with that.

DR: *No, of course. It's exactly the same as happens everywhere. The point of bringing that up is an attempt to collapse that distinction: we can see it being used cynically on both sides – that's human nature, and the nature of religion. Just one further . . . Do you want to [say something else] before I change the subject?*

BT: It made me think also . . . again, returning to Talamanca and the Costa Rican context, I think indigenous religion – or *religión indígena* as they say in Spanish – is sometimes used as a foreign relations tool towards an audience of outsiders, like us: academicians and politicians and others. But sometimes it also creates internal tensions. For example, when indigenous traditions are recast as indigenous religions. When indigenous religions are being taught at school, parents who are Christians – Pentecostals in particular – often say, “My children should not take those classes.” So they’re pulled out of those classes that they were fine with – as long as these issues were not enacted or articulated as religion, but as culture. So bringing religion into the mix sort of changes a whole lot of situations, and relations, and the ways things are talked about.

AL: Also, just one final point, I think. If we are looking at indigenous peoples practising a kind of religion, then are we also open to what kind of religion indigenous peoples are practising? So, I mean it could be say, Christianity. So, in that sense, is Christianity an indigenous religion? And I think, the common perception is that indigenous religions are largely non-Christian. And I think that's an interesting thing. Because, if we have a formal definition of what indigenous religion is, then I think it might problematise some of the ways we tend to think about indigenous religions.

DR: *Yes, absolutely. And that kind-of relates, actually, to the question that I was going to raise, in an unexpected way. So I was going to ask about . . . there's a sort-of time element in this. We don't, for*
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instance, tend to see New Age practices in the West as an indigenous religion. Is that just because of the newness? Or is it the colonial power aspect? Or is it a hangover to the hegemony of Christianity, for instance? (30:00) But here in Scotland – just to take it as an example, because that's where we are – Christianity is only 58% or something, at present. And that's just people who identify, not necessarily people who are practising in any kind of meaningful sense. So as you say, actually, once we start looking, the further down we go these distinctions get more and more blurry.

AL: Yes. Absolutely and I think the term indigenous . . . well, I'm not sure about the academic discipline of indigenous religions, how that came about. I think people like Jim Cox has written about this transition from primal to indigenous and all of that. And I think, as far as I can recall – and you can correct me on this – I think it was from the '70s or the '80s that indigenous religions was seen as a category in its own right.

DR: *Yes*

AL: It's curious how the term indigenous is not really popular in, say, Europe. I think in Canada it is. And of course in North America it is, and in Latin America it is. But in Europe, it's quite interesting that it's not. I mean, we can perhaps easily see that actually Christianity is an indigenous religion of Scotland. So yes, I'm interested in that kind of idea as well. And what makes something indigenous and what doesn't.

DR: Well one example I've mentioned before is . . . there's an example in Jim's book (and incidentally, for the history of the emergence of the term, in [Bjørn's previous interview](#) with the RSP we go into that in a bit more detail). But there's an example where he talks about Zulus in South Africa being an indigenous tradition. But the Zulus migrated into South Africa from the Sahara, what 7-800 years ago? Whereas, the Dutch arrived there about 400 years ago. So, the choice of which of those is indigenous is entirely temporal.

BT: Again, I think this has to do with [the fact that] there are different language games being played here. I think the emergence of the international indigenous people's movement and its success, since the 1970s and onwards, has made the word indigenous take on primarily the meaning of the reference to indigenous peoples. That's what most people associate with it today. That's the dominant use of it in most contexts. Whereas, the old use of the adjective indigenous would be something like the opposite

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of exogenous. So it's a relational concept, or relational category, that could be applied to all kinds of things. But usually we associate Today, because of the relative success of the international indigenous people's movement, it has become this tag or emblem for indigeneity, for indigenous peoples: shorthand for indigenous peoples. But it can be used in many other ways, and it is used in other ways. But then the discussions tend to be . . . I think many misunderstandings arise from . . .

DR: *Talking around each other, instead of to each other.*

AL: But, it could be also be a case of the dominant group not categorising or associating themselves with indigenous religions, say. And it could be that the category indigenous religions is applying to only the marginalised communities. Which incidentally, it's not always the case. Because, speaking with [Afe](#), in Nigeria [for example] indigenous religions is the dominant kind of group in certain areas. So of course, that again throws up . . . and if you want to look at Hinduism as an indigenous religion, then what happens to the category, but also the way we *conceive* of indigenous religions? I guess that is the term that I'm looking for, yes.

DR: *(35:00) Thank you both. This has been a really interesting discussion and we've covered most of the different ways this terms been defined and understood. But, as you're hearing this term and engaging with this term, just bear some of these ideas in mind and try to unpick which of the usages is being used in whatever source you're looking at, at any given time. So thanks, again, to both of you for taking part in the Religious Studies Project today.*

BT: Thank you for having us.

AL: Thanks, David.

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