

AASR PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2004

Intellectuals of the Other in Religion: Fear and Fascination

Adam Possamai

University of Western Sydney

The analysis of the role of intellectuals in social life has been widely studied and theorized. However, little application has been made on the involvement of the intellectual in the study of religions. This paper analyses the different types of intellectuals, e.g. Bauman's legislators and interpreters, and the role they take in researching and/or speaking for and/or against the other in religion.

Introduction

What are intellectuals? And more specifically, what are intellectuals who study religion? What are their roles in this diversified, multi-ethnic, multi-creed, and post-modern world?

This address will first deal with what intellectuals are from a sociological perspective. This perspective has been quite secularist in its approach, and this address aims at bridging the gap between the sociological literature and the field of religious studies. In the second part of this address, I will deal with the role of these intellectuals from this field of research and action; that is, us. I will argue that whatever the work that we do, be it discreet or public, it has a great importance in the process of our civilization. By this, I make reference to the work of Norbert Elias (1995) on the process of civilization, which suggests that there is no such thing as a perfect society, but only one which can be better than what it was in the past. Paradoxically, I will argue, following the work of Habermas, that we should strive towards the perhaps old-fashioned project of modernity and its dream of its enlightened citizen, but include within this project a more humane and less calculative approach that religion, among other factors, could bring towards this process of civilization.

What are the Intellectuals?

Finding a perfect definition of what an intellectual is is problematic. It is already a challenge for intellectuals to reach a consensus about concepts – think for example of the term post-modern, late modern, high modern, post-fordism, post-industrialism and how confused students are when we tell them about this time period which is theorized in so many different ways. Now, think about intellectuals attempting a consensus about a definition of themselves especially

when their intellectual background can be so diversified. Some of them can follow universal principles such as Marxism and functionalism, others can be post-modern, post-colonialist, feminist, etc. The problem with such a defining task is that any attempt to define intellectuals is an attempt at self-definition and involves a personal story and agenda. Far from arguing that there should be a different definition for each intellectual, we can find in the literature some broad definitions that can be of help for this address and which we are exploring right now. At a later stage, I will apply them for a case study on New Religious Movements before exploring the role of the intellectuals in today's society.

Intellectuals, depending on the definition, have been present in our society for a very long time. One only needs to read Max Weber's (1995) opus on *The Sociology of Religion* to remember that all of the great religious doctrines of Asia are the creation of intellectuals, and that, for example, Manicheism and Gnosticism, the salvation religions of the Near East, are both specifically religions of intellectuals. In comparison, the place of intellectuals, especially lay intellectuals, have not had such a profound importance in the development of mainstream Christianity in the West. We could, of course, discuss the history of intellectuals for a long time in this presentation, however, I would like to move now to the 19th century and to the birth of the modern intellectual; the type of intellectual that we are familiar with today.

This birth came with the Dreyfus *affaire* in 1898. Dreyfus was a captain of the French army who was wrongly accused of revealing secret French documents to the Prussians. The French army, at this time, was the stronghold of monarchists and Catholics and was anti-Semitic. Even if Dreyfus saw himself as French, his heritage was Jewish. Because of his background he was then used as a scapegoat and sentenced to degradation and deportation for life. He was sent to Devils Island, off the coast of French Guiana, for solitary confinement. Novelists such as Zola, who wrote his famous '*J'accuse*', journalists, poets, artists and university professors expressed their discontent with this case and came to see themselves as intellectuals in their fight against prejudice and injustice. It is claimed that the word 'intellectual' was first used with the Dreyfus case when the politician Clemenceau used it to describe this group. They were called the *Dreyfusard*, and their purpose was demonstrated with this syllogism: 'They complain, therefore they exist'. From this heated event, intellectuals realized their strength and that they could develop common interests that set them apart from other groups in society. They saw themselves as a class in themselves. They were questioning traditional values in the name of reason and progress and were carriers of the ideal of the Enlightenment.

Later, social theorists such as Karl Mannheim (1991) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) criticized this approach towards intellectual class consciousness. Mannheim, from the Frankfurt School, stated that intellectuals transcend class to a certain degree because of their need for a broader point of view and their interest in seeing the whole of the social and political structure. The Italian Marxist

Gramsci, in his prison notebooks, believed that intellectuals are not a class in themselves, but that they are bound to their class of origin. Intellectuals cannot form a single group, but are divided into sub-groups that emerge from and serve specific classes. The bourgeoisie produces its intellectuals, as does the proletariat. Intellectuals, for Gramsci, thus work for the interest of their own class and are called within this perspective 'organic intellectuals'. He also viewed the role of working class intellectuals as having a key role with the Marxist revolutionary movement.

These intellectuals, be it a class in themselves or not, were supporting the universal ideas of reason and progress that had to be spread all over the world. However, today, intellectuals in this post-colonial and post-modern society can no longer offer critiques and a vision that can encompass all or many strata of a specific society. To understand this, Zygmunt Bauman's work is very helpful. He draws a difference between two types of intellectuals; what he calls legislators and interpreters. For Bauman, intellectuals tended to be legislators during modernity. During this time period - let's say, for argument sake, between 1789 and the 1960s - the world was seen as an ordered entity which could be explained and controlled with the right type of knowledge. This world was conceived as comprising Nation-States with clear territorial and cultural boundaries. During that time period, intellectuals tended to be legislators by making authoritative statements; and they were heard. Intellectuals had a better access to knowledge than non-intellectuals and because of this, had the right and the social duty to create, support or oppose beliefs and opinions held in various sections of a specific society. Now in post-modernity, in a time period - let's say for argument sake from the 1960s - in which there is a plurality of cultures mushrooming in a globalizing world, the intellectual can no longer make decisions for others, he or she can only be a mediator in communication between different autonomous groups. The intellectual of the past, with his or her universal ideas is less heard by the public and by other intellectuals. The intellectual of today can only interpret his or her knowledge of one specific group, of one specific culture, and/or of one specific field of knowledge and speak of it as an expert. His or her role is to speak on behalf of this group, culture, and discipline in a lay language that can be understood by the public and/or by other intellectuals who are experts in other fields of knowledge.

Even if Bauman argues that intellectuals must maintain their role as both legislators and interpreters, the trend of today is that they are mainly interpreters. If the legislator was a universal intellectual, the interpreter is specific to one field or group.

Further to this multiplicity of groupings and cultures, knowledge has also become fragmented. Within post-modernity, knowledge is no longer universal but compartmentalized within various disciplines. Intellectuals are no longer universal thinkers, but experts, or specialists, from within their field. These experts are so specialized that for the outsiders, they do not speak English but a jargon of their own. For example, being a sociologist and addressing myself to all of you, who are

experts of the religious field within your own discipline, my role here is to avoid sociological jargon, so useful to sociologists, but sometimes esoteric to the untrained. Today, the work of an expert tends to remain esoteric to the outsider, and it might be argued that what is left to the intellectual is to interpret this jargon and make it understood by others.

Today, we are faced with the silence of intellectuals. This does not mean that they talk less, but that they are less listened to. If they speak with their jargon only, their public will be mainly their colleagues from their field of knowledge and thus limited. Another reason for this silence is that they are also in competition with other forms of knowledge such as the media and the Internet, which, generally speaking, are more about entertainment than about information and scholarly developed opinion. The intellectual of today needs to be able to speak to the public in an entertaining way and we are not well trained to be media friendly. We are dealing with abstract and complex ideas that cannot be expressed in a 10 second time slot. Not only are intellectuals in competition with other sources of knowledge and information, but also their knowledge does not seem to sell well; and in a neo-liberal society, to be heard is to sell. Speaking about the commercialization of knowledge, I cannot stop thinking of the famous line by Michael Douglas in the movie *Wall Street*: 'Greed is good'. This line had a great impact on the generation growing up in the 80s and 90s. Perhaps, as intellectuals of the religious, we should compete with the media and influence today's generation by stating that "Creed is Good". If I may go further in my trip of metaphors, intellectuals, to be heard, to be part of the media at large, should have their own show at a good time slot to reach the wider audience. Perhaps they should even have their own reality show; could we think of a big brother with intellectuals only? This leads to many issues that, unfortunately, we do not have the time for, but we should bear in mind that for intellectuals to be heard by the larger public, there is a price to pay - and I mean this metaphorically and literally. We should not forget that Zola did not pay to publish his article '*J'accuse*'; the case today would be totally different.

What is an intellectual of the other in religion in contemporary western society? This person would be an interpreter of a specific religious group and/or religion and will make this knowledge available to the public, other religions, other intellectuals from within the field of religious studies, and other intellectuals from outside of this field. The intellectual, in that sense, can be a religious or a layperson, but needs to interpret his or her knowledge to other people and groups from outside a specific religious group. Two perfect epitomes of this intellectual would be those who are involved in interfaith programs and those who research in the field of religion and share their findings at a conference such as this one.¹ This definition would, of course, not work well in certain non-western countries and in other time periods such as the Middle Ages.

Being an interpreter does not mean that the intellectual should just reveal his or her knowledge only. There is more to it. Indeed, for Chomsky (1997), the

responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth. It is a moral imperative for them to find out and transmit the truth about issues that matter to the right audience. And I believe that if we are interpreters, we need to do this task and be true about religion, be true about its fascinating side, and be true about its fearful side as well. We should not forget that if 'creed is good', we might wonder how to define this goodness and to whom a creed is good; be it for insiders only and/or for the population at large.

There are also other responsibilities for the intellectual. For the late Palestinian, Said (1994), intellectuals must denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority. Their purpose is to advance human freedom and knowledge. But to do such a thing, there is a condition. The true intellectual, for him, is always an outsider; one who lives in the margins of society in a kind of self-imposed exile. Truth can only be reached by the intellectual if he or she stands apart from a specific society and judges it from the outside. From this, it would be quite interesting to debate if one can be an intellectual of his or her own religion. Can one be an intellectual of the religious by studying a group that he or she belongs to? Raising this question will certainly lead to some great discussion and disagreements about the nature of the intellectual, however I would like to move now to my case study.

Intellectuals in the Field of New Religious Movements

The field of research on New Religious Movements, a more positive appellation than the controversial name of cults, is in tension among intellectuals. The word 'cult' is a word used to scare, to worry and to sell in the milieu of sensationalist journalism. The term became highly derogatory after the mass suicide/murder of followers of Jim Jones in Guyana in 1978. While numerous new religious movements had formally been treated individually, following this killing, they have all tended to be negatively termed 'cults'; even if there exists a considerable diversity among them. If most Anti-Cult Movements' pronouncements tend to be about 'destructive cults', they also have the tendency to lump many new religious groups together as though they were a single entity: 'the sins of one being visited on all' (Barker, 1995: 297).

This tension between researchers and social activists could be crudely generalized as the tension between cult apologists and anti-cultists, also called cult bashers. A cult apologist would be a person who considers the 'conversion' techniques used by these groups to be no different than those employed by more respectable groups. This person will refer to these religious groups as New Religious Movements and/or religious minorities and will tend to be in dialogue with insiders. An anti-cultist would be a person who tends to express the danger of 'cult indoctrination' via so-called 'brainwashing techniques' and lobby for social, political, and legal injunctions against cults. This person would tend to be in contact with the family of a 'cult member' and with apostates. Within this counter-cult group, four categories can be distinguished (Chryssides, 1999: 345): 1. Secular counter-cult organisations; 2. Christian evangelical counter-cult groups; 3.

NRM-specific groups – e.g. Counter Scientology Europe; and 4. Organizations that offer the services of deprogrammers – that is, services to abduct members by the use of force and to restore them to ‘normality’. These organizations frequently co-operate with each other, and network in complex ways.

This field of research is vast and polemic, however we could understand and refine this debate with what we have discovered about the intellectual of the religious. All involved in this field, be them journalists, social workers and social activists, psychologists, sociologists, NRM’s scholarly insiders²... are all intellectuals but not of the same type. Anti-cultists tend to equate all new religious movements in the same category and have been viewed as dangerous, or potentially dangerous. For apologists, there is only a small minority of these groups that are destructive and that have been extensively covered in the media. Indeed, one would find it hard to forget the mass killing at Waco (1993), in the Order of the Solar Temple (1994), in the Aum Shinri-kyo (1995), in the Heaven’s Gate (1997) group, and in the movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda (2000). Cult apologists tend to make a distinction between specific groups and do not portray all of them as dangerous.

I am tempted to equate anti-cultists as legislators who are seeking to apply universalistic principles and who aim to influence the public at large. Their definition of cult tends to refer to religious groups with an authoritarian leadership which suppress rational thought, organise deceptive recruitment techniques, use coercive mind control, and isolate members from conventional society and former relationships; and this definition tends to be wrongly applied to all of these minority groups. On the other hand, we could argue that cult apologists would be more interpreters as their work aims at exposing what specific New Religious Movements are to the public and to other intellectuals. Legislators exacerbate a sense of fear about these new movements, and interpreters, while still not denying the criminality of a very small percentage of these groups, might develop a sense of fascination.

We should not forget, even if intellectuals are less heard, that these legislators had great influence over the drafting of the French anti-cult legislation in 2001 which undermines fundamental principles of religious freedom and diversity, not to mention basic principals of human rights. On May 30, 2001, French anti-cult legislation passed through the parliament. Its initial draft called for specific criteria for the dissolution of a ‘cult’ such as; repeated complaints from families against the ‘cult’; prohibition of ‘cults’ near ‘vulnerable’ areas (e.g. schools and hospitals), no renaming or reorganization of dissolved ‘cults’; and recognition of the new crime of ‘mental manipulation’ (i.e. brainwashing). This draft was aimed to provide the State with the means to dissolve any ‘cult’ that it chooses. However, after the objections by the mainline churches, the initial idea of an administrative dissolution of ‘cults’ has been abandoned and the government may not act freely.

Many other cases could be applied to this address, however I would like to move now to the role of the intellectual.

What is the Role of Intellectuals in the Field of Religious Studies?

Habermas' work is vast and complex. For this reason, this section will only concentrate on one of his key concepts: that of the colonisation of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). The systematic colonisation of the lifeworld is in reference to the replacement of the mechanisms of social coordination by mechanisms of political and financial accumulation.

I will first deal with his concept of the lifeworld; which can be understood as everyday life, and will come back to his concept of colonisation very shortly. The author sees in this lifeworld a field where culture, personality, meaning and symbols meet and where civil society would more or less be active. This lifeworld would form the basis for communication; that is, communicative action. By these actions, Habermas makes reference to individuals' linguistic interaction such as debates in newspapers and television, conferences like this one, café discussions, etc. The communicative interactions allow individuals to reach a level of knowledge of the other; that is, an intersubjective recognition. This would enable the establishment of cooperation between individuals which is not based on the maximisation of profit, but that is, on the contrary, aimed to develop debate on questions dealing with the quality of life and to open dialogue with others. Thanks to this, human beings humanise themselves through their interaction with other individuals and, through this, the plurality of values or the plurality of the visions from our world is linked to an ethic based on the understanding between movements and groups which makes possible the constant renewal of social consensus.

In contrast to communicative action, instrumental reason operates through the system - the system is the field where we find the instrumental action of multinational corporations and the political power. When this instrumental reason spreads in the lifeworld, Habermas makes reference to an effect of colonisation which is growing more and more in this period of late capitalism and thus reduces all expression of communicative action. By this, he argues that methods used for making profit and being more efficient are used extensively for the sake of efficiency, even within civil society. This leads to the fetishisation of growth per se, and its maximisation process treats other values such as human nature and traditions instrumentally. Indeed, the effect of corruption from economic factors on the democratic political process, the obscure mixture between news information and entertainment, the transformation of students into consumers and teachers into producers, and the passive civil engagement of westerners, show a few examples on the way the colonisation of the lifeworld happens. The lifeworld tends to be reduced while the system is spreading its tentacles. This colonisation of instrumental reason, aiming at the accumulation of profit, reduces more and more the strength of communicative action from the lifeworld. The result of this process is a permanent tension between the lifeworld and the system, which threatens the Enlightenment project.

In regards to religion, this phenomenon that modernist philosophers were trying to get rid of or to privatise, Habermas saw in it an agent of communicative action that was not necessarily taking part in the emancipation project carried by the enlightened philosophers. He also thought, in the 1980s, that religions were agents of legitimation for state intervention in civil society. Now, he admits himself that religions can also be agents of contestation and can offer new ways of being that are not calculative (Habermas, 2002: 79). For example, Wallace (2003) uses Habermas' theory to understand Islamic fundamentalism. He demonstrates that the colonisation of the lifeworld can only be in antagonism with religious sensibilities. This antagonism can even exacerbate the conflict with the colonisation forces and even provoke a deep religious reaction. From this, Wallace claims that the fundamentalist branches of Islam are in a structural tension with the system.

So, in western societies, what would the role of an intellectual of the religious be in this grand theory? Coming back to our definition of this intellectual as an interpreter, he or she will actively participate in communicative action by various means. He or she could be involved in inter-faith dialogue and thus promote the understanding of various religious groups. He or she can be involved in the research of these groups and transmit the findings in conferences like this one and in journals like the *Australian Religion Studies Review*. These actions do not necessarily have to reach the larger community to work. All written and oral activities can take part in this communicative action. This action, for Habermas, is fundamental for today's reworked project of modernity.

We cannot deny that the initial project of modernity has failed. The development of reason and progress has led to unwanted consequences such as the two World Wars, the rise of Nazism, the construction of extermination camps, worldwide depression, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Persian Gulf, a widening gap between rich and poor, and ecological catastrophes. All of these atrocities are an outcome of the dream of 'reason', and this makes any contemporary belief in the ideology of progress questionable. However, we should not throw out the baby with the bath water. Great ideals were created. If the lifeworld had not been so colonized, social outcomes might have been different. One way to create a balance and to make the dream of '(human) reason' come true is by promoting communicative action.

If the birth of modernity, especially in France, rejected religious ideals within the hope that religious wars would no longer happen, if the birth of post-modernity rejected reason as an ideal, perhaps a way towards working on the process of civilization is to allow religion to be part of the Enlightenment project. We still can strive towards the development of reason and progress, but a reason which is not instrumental only and a progress which is not purely material and quantitative. Religion and spirituality could help us turn this reason towards a more human aspect and progress towards a more equitable and qualitative output; a value-oriented output that promotes human rights, human solidarity, justice, and

spirituality and that opposes both religious extremism and empty secularism. Of course, by allowing such a fusion between faith and reason in a new civilization project that would fit with our multi-cultural and multi-faith world, we should bear in mind that some religious groups and sub-groups are more equipped than others. We should also be careful that in a world in which we can see that anything goes, some will make exclusivist truth claims, will use violent means, and will be intolerant towards others. We should also note that if western societies are moving towards being post-secular, it does not mean that they should become anti-secular.

What I am speaking about is not the ideal project; it is just a project in which intellectuals of the religious are working hard on. The large majority of us are involved in inter-faith programs and in the study of religions and are thus already taking part in communicative action. On top of this, with our social and research activities, we are directly or indirectly involved in building a dialogue between religious groups and between religious groups and the secular. By being an intellectual of the interpretative type we can transmit our knowledge to others. As intellectuals we can take part in the type of communicative action that is conducive to make this fusion between faith and reason possible, and we have to constantly make sure that this ideal does not become perverted or short sighted.

Endnotes

1. The 2004 Australian Association for the Study of Religions conference 'Fear and Fascination: The Other in Religion' at the University of Western Sydney (16-18 July 2004).
2. Beckford (2003, 153) makes a reference to some 'organic intellectuals' from ISKCON and the Soka Gakkai who have established their own institutions of higher education where research is being developed and contacts are made with academic researchers.

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