

**Commentary Notes for Author, Tomoko Masuzawa  
on *The Invention of World Religions*  
(Annual Meeting, AAR, November 2005)**

To: Tomoko Masuzawa  
From: Ivan Strenski  
Re: The Invention of World Religions

Dear Tomoko:

Here are some ‘talking points’ that I intend to explore at the AAR session on your new book. I shall make some general remarks, some methodological remarks and some points about specific claims and assertions.

You will see, while I think you offer us a lot to think about – high praise in my book – the book somehow seems to me an ‘unfinished symphony.’ I did not note it in my remarks below, nor will I bring up the point at AAR, but there seems to me a regrettable lack of attention and/or recognition of our fellow scholars in this field, such as Greg Alles on Otto, Arie Molendijk on the entire Dutch tradition, Richard Gombrich on ‘Protestant’ Buddhism, Sylvain Lévi on Brahminic ‘rootedness’ versus and Buddhist universalism, Don Wiebe on phenomenology and theology, and so on. This absence weakens the potential authority of your conclusions, and may be picked up by a ‘persnickety’ reviewer, who trot out a list like this as evidence of gaps in your research.

**1. Generalities**

- a. There’s lots of interesting points in this work, and an admirable coverage of authors, traditions of scholarship and such – the discussion of the two Burnoufs (249ff) and Max Müller’s curious relation to the Aryanism of Emile Burnouf, the bringing out how Islam was excluded from being a “world religion” while Buddhism was not – and your querying why this should be so, Tiele’s relation to the discourse of “world religions” versus “national religions”, and so on.
- b. The subject of the origins and nature of the *discourse on world religions* is as well worthy of our focused inquiry especially in the 1920's when you claim that it is established. Oddly, however, no close investigation of the 1920's follows on this otherwise interesting claim.
- c. It does not seem to me clear at any point, however, why investigation of this discourse should be a compelling kind of inquiry, and the focus of an entire book.

**2. Methodological Remarks: Embedded in Contexts and Authorial Intention**

- a. I find a general failure to locate talk about “world” in the phrase “world religions” in a salient immediate historical context. This makes it sometime needlessly hard to understand what the discourse of world religions meant to those using it – when it was supposed to have been created. The fine points made about Tiele’s self-conscious use of this discourse is an exception here. What about all those other folk who do not hand us a ‘smoking gun’? What were they on about? Was

there a vogue for talk about “world” or universalist entities at the same time as the discourse of “world religions” arose? And, if so, what might this tell us about the vogue for talk about “world religions”?

- b. Might it not have been useful, for example, to investigate how talk about “world religions” was like and/or unlike similar locutions – at least in terms of their ideological underpinnings – talk about “world literature”, “world revolution”, “world war”, “world brotherhood” to name a few? Or, since Masuzawa claims that the term “world religions” dates from the 1920's, what especially of its use then so close to the currency of the term “world war”? Do analogous kinds of oppositions, and for analogous reasons, occur as say for a literature that is said to be “national” and another that is said to be universal – “world” – literature, or for a war that is said to be a “world” conflict, even when parts of the world were spared combat, or where much of what transpired could be said to be about ‘nationalism’ or a European ‘civil’ war?
- c. Or, are you claiming that the talk of “world religions” was incomparable, unique and thus without peers? Are you claiming that knowing what these ‘sister’ discourses were would not help us understand the discourse on “world religions” better? If not, then what is this larger set of discourses in which the discourse of “world religions” can usefully be located?
- d. In general, I think too little effort, therefore, has been placed upon making sense of the original contexts of the discourse on “world religions,” or even in the context of their establishment in the 1920's. Without this, I do not find that I understand what those pushing this discourse were trying to do. In this sense, the disclaimers in para. 2 of page 107 about the paucity of “available evidence” concerning the origins of this way of talking is not persuasive. And, why indeed so little on the 1920's? An intellectual historian should be creative in concocting ways to tease out such evidence – such as I have indicated in seeking the wider linguistic, historical and lexical contexts. In this sense “promising suspicions” are likewise not adequate – how indeed can one tell if a “suspicion” is “promising” unless one has begun uncovering the evidence in question. In that case, one ought to finish the job and follow through. (For further all-too-frequent appeal to ‘suspicions’, ‘impressions’ and their ilk see pages xiii, 12, 13, 20, 21, 22, 23, 114, 115n8, and so on)
- e. Likewise, not enough work seems to have been done in bringing to bear the social and cultural embeddedness of the language of “world religions.” This leads to the ignoring of the religious historical movements and formations that gave life and purpose to various kinds of discourse. Masuzawa believes, for example, that Max Müller was a relative loner in his intellectual world, and that his influence and the ideal of a ‘science of religion’ pretty much begins and ends with him.(244) To

quote, Max Müller “was atypical and even eccentric in view of the prevailing opinions of the philologists and comparative religionists of his time, and on the other, he utterly failed in having his opinions recognized, let alone in persuading others to agree with him.” (244) This, I think, is flatly mistaken because Müller’s ideal of a ‘science of religion,’ however his contemporaries may have contested his particular version thereof, was the reigning paradigm for the non-confessional and comparative study of religion in the better half of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

f. **Missing Max Müller**

Getting back to the point of insensitivity and inattention to social and cultural embeddedness, in assessing Max Müller as she does, Masuzawa misses the relation of the discourse on “world religions” to, at least, one of the socio-cultural bases that made this kind of talk salient, if not possible, in the first place. We risk missing the point of such a discourse if we ignore the substantial personal, scientific and religious alliances of Max Müller with Tiele in the Netherlands and Albert and Jean Réville in Paris – two of the most important centers in the world in the entire study of religion outside the United Kingdom.

It is odd in a way that Masuzawa misses these links, since she notes the tantalizing, yet obscure fact, that Max Müller’s daughter, Bernice S. Colyer-Fergusson, translated Chantepie de la Saussaye’s *Manual of the History of Religions*, (109) but without drawing the conclusion that her father and the Dutch might well have shared a common intellectual enterprise. Add to the connections with the Netherlands, that the French term of the study of religion – “Science Religieuse” – was a literal translation of Max Müller’s term, and served to label what was done in that vast arena of the study of religion in Paris from the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup>. Moreover, the Révilles made a special effort to sponsor Tiele’s work in series of translations that ran in the *Revue de l’histoire des religions*. The questions then that need asking here are those that bear on the nature of that common – international – effort in the science of religion. I think it would greatly improve the book Masuzawa has written if her otherwise interesting discussions of the discourse on “world religions” could be integrated with at least one of the social bases in which they subsisted – the science of religion inaugurated by Max Müller.

g. **For Real Contexts**

In the place of a real context of social relations of the modes of production of knowledge, Masuzawa gives us what are quite gross and misleading generalizations about what the so-called ‘19<sup>th</sup>’ or ‘20<sup>th</sup> centuries’ (sic) thought and did. Consider only the conclusion to Part 2 on page 256, where the author writes of an old 19<sup>th</sup> paradigm’s demise and the rise of the new 20<sup>th</sup> talk of “world religions.” Among other problems, the author never ask for whom this shift occurred?

But particulars have a way of undoing the neatest of such developmental schemes. I would like to know why the author does not make more of the fact

that Tiele, whom the author cites for his early use of the term “world religions” in the sense of Masuzawa’s “universalist religion” – actually in 1864, not nearly a decade and a half later in 1876 as Masuzawa asserts (109) – for the most part abandons the term, as Masuzawa notes, (111) for the balance of his career, just when it should have been coming into vogue? (Molendijk 2005, 168-9) It does not seem to me consistent to say, as Masuzawa does, that she is more concerned about a “rationale for demarcation” and not with “nomenclature,” when all along, concern for the emergence of the term, “world religions,” has been the focal announced issue of the book. Why draw us into the difficulties in tracking down original uses of the term on page 107, para 2, if ‘nomenclature’ all of a sudden will not matter on page 111? I am left confused by the sudden abandonment of a concern with terms!

***Bibliography:***

Molendijk, A.L. 2005. *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.