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The Legacy of Colonialism in the Recognition of Religions

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During the New Imperialism (1884–1920) period, an attitude pervaded the Western mindset that non-Christian religions were inferior and unsophisticated. At the heart of the colonialist view was ‘the white man’s burden’ of civilising primitive societies, including converting Indigenous peoples to Christianity. This aim escalated into a conscious effort among colonial powers to exert dominance over their subjects by othering and stereotyping non-Christians by presenting their religions through the prism of exoticism and orientalism. This article explores how colonialism accelerated modern recognition and registration issues for religious communities and continues to influence state-religion relations today, including how governments restrict religious freedom.

Keywords: colonialism, orientalism, registration issues,
religious exoticism, religious freedom, state recognition

Introduction

On the morning of 1 June 1840, abolitionist Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton delivered a lecture at Exeter Hall in London at the inaugural meeting of the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilisation of Africa.¹ During his impassioned speech, Buxton outlined his plan to solve the problem of slave trading in Africa, by introducing the following three c's to the continent: Christianity, civilisation and commerce.² Among Buxton's listeners that day was aspiring missionary David Livingstone who, by the end of that year, travelled to southern Africa to begin putting Buxton's ideas into practice.³ While the efforts of Livingstone and other Victorian-era social reformers helped end the transatlantic slave trade, their mentality contrasts with the contemporary approach that values religious equality. They saw Christianity as the superior religion that, when brought to Africa, would civilise its people, leading to non-Christians being stereotyped and subjugated during the colonial period.⁴

This article contends that the consequences of this attitude reverberate in the recognition and registration systems of many nations today, constituting a root cause of ongoing religious freedom violations.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the breadth of colonial influence on contemporary trends of how states recognise religions and legally register their affiliate organisations by exploring colonial attitudes towards Indigenous religion. The article will consider how non-Christian religious communities were represented in colonial cartography and how they were labelled pejoratively to leverage colonisation efforts. The intention is to draw a link between the imperial use of religion as a tool of subjugation with ongoing recognition and registration issues, the impacts of which have proven detrimental to religious freedom conditions across authoritarian and democratic states.⁵ Moreover, a broader goal is to establish a clearer understanding of the lineage of religious recognition and registration issues, as influenced to a degree by the impacts of colonialism.

To begin to ascertain a link between colonialism and contemporary recognition and registration issues, it is appropriate to provide some context by outlining the key concerns for religious freedom. Firstly, recognition and registration should be differentiated due to their distinct functions. Recognition is a sociocultural process in which religions or beliefs and their community of followers gain acknowledgement and validation over time in various cultural and social spheres that support their legitimacy in society, a process the state can choose to facilitate or hinder.⁶ On the other hand, registration is a state-led mechanism

granting legal personality to religious or belief organisations, often tied in with a range of benefits that are either concessional (i.e. the rights communities are granted by registering), financial (e.g. tax-exempt status) or symbolic (e.g. inclusion in a register of religious organisations).⁷ Concessional benefits are of principal concern because they offer an opportunity for states to limit the religious activities communities and organisations may legally conduct by mandating that they must undergo registration beforehand to gain the appropriate rights even though they have already been established by modern human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted in 1966.

Perhaps the most efficient way of outlining registration issues is to present them chronologically according to what stage of registration at which they are likely to emerge. For instance, at the preregistration stage, two major concerns involve the orientation and structure of registration systems. The orientation of a registration system becomes problematic whenever religious or belief organisations are obliged to register due to a mandatory registration order, a practice common to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states.⁸ The structure of registration systems becomes problematic whenever access to registration is restricted for some religious or belief organisations and not others, as is practised in nations that impose membership quotas on

applicant religious groups.⁹ Issues during registration procedures themselves involve states making registration onerous while a further concern is whenever states request information of applicant religious or belief organisations that is later used to surveil or raid places of worship and perform arbitrary arrests.¹⁰ Finally, concerns at the postregistration stage involve the lengths religious or belief groups must go to in order to remain registered, occasionally having to complete laborious reports of their activities while facing the constant threat of deregistration which is significant in countries where unregistered religious activity is criminalised.¹¹

Registration issues are often exacerbated by recognition issues, most of which stem from state interference in the process of recognition by actively favouring one or more religions or beliefs over others, resulting in biased and exclusionary state definitions of religion. This leads to unequal treatment of religious communities and in the worst cases, states actively misrepresenting religions in disfavour to justify discrimination or violent persecution.¹² If a religious group's beliefs and practices are new or unfamiliar, states may not accept their legitimacy in society and so laws, including those involving registration, are enacted to protect the established or majority religion's hegemony to prevent minority groups from gaining recognition.¹³ This represents a misuse of recognition and registration because such

mechanisms would ideally facilitate the activities of a diverse range of religious or belief organisations by lowering institutional barriers to make organisation and practise easier to improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

An attempt needs to be made to understand why these issues exist in most modern states, albeit in some instances applied with greater detriment to human rights than others. The role of colonialism in the contemporary prevalence of recognition and registration issues should be better understood. While Livingstone and the other social reformers of the early Victorian era may have started with an authentic desire to end the slave trade, their views tainted with Christian supremacism meant their activities concurrently served in justifying imperial domination and suppressing Indigenous religion rather than solely embodying an altruistic attempt to help underdeveloped societies improve their standards of living.¹⁴

Religious recognition in the colonial period

Colonial uses of recognition can be divided into state-led efforts, artistic and cartographical expressions, as well as recognition or lack thereof in the written word, including labelling religions and their communities of adherents pejoratively to emphasise their inferiority. Underlying these types is a Western categorisation of the world's

religions, which became synonymous with a Christian perspective on non-Christian religions.¹⁵ Such categories served in establishing a hierarchy of religions, with Christianity the most enlightened and the religion that, when propagated, had the power to civilise societies that Western powers regarded as primitive.¹⁶ In turn, missionaries became colonial agents, contributing to the machine of cultural imperialism, with religious institutions serving a crucial role in the imperialist agenda due to their power to shape society.¹⁷ The mentality of the missionaries of the colonial era was adverse because it positioned Christianity as superior, with missions framed as Westerners dispensing their wisdom sympathetically to civilise unsophisticated peoples.¹⁸ This resulted in three main outcomes: (1) the misrecognition of Indigenous religions; (2) state policies and systems restricting religious activity; and (3) the furtherance of the imperialist goals of control and subjugation. At the heart of colonialist attitudes towards the religions of their colonised subjects was a definitive dismissiveness: the traditional religious beliefs and practices of Indigenous people were crude, idolatrous and primitive.¹⁹

For example, the Christianisation of Indigenous African populations was justified by missionaries on the claim that sub-Saharan Africa was devoid of religion before the arrival of the European missionaries, before which only superstition existed there.²⁰ In postcolonial studies,

the embracement of Christianity among sub-Saharan Africans has been attributed to the perception among Indigenous communities that converting to Christianity would either bring social advantage in the new colonial regime or would allow such communities to entirely circumvent or at least reduce colonial overbearingness.²¹ However, this hope would be in vain as the colonisers were dedicated to their civilising mission. Framing colonisation as a programme of civilisation allowed colonisers to justify their activities as beneficial to the colonised. Moreover, offering the chance to attain civility was almost construed as an altruistic act of charity on behalf of Western powers, a crucial component of which involved introducing Christianity to the region.²²

Creating maps to survey the world had an important function during the colonial period, as cartography acted as a propaganda outlet for the Western imperial powers to visualise their global dominance, confirming European supremacy.²³ Of particular relevance are those nineteenth-century maps that visualised religious demographics, often construed as presenting evidence of religious hierarchisation in the Western worldview. Western cartography of this kind tended to present European Christians as enlightened, as well as culturally and politically superior to all other populations of the world. The epitome of Eurocentric cartography is an 1821 map created by American

geographer William Channing Woodbridge titled 'Moral & Political Chart of the Inhabited World' (See Figure 1).²⁴ The map organises the major religious groups into levels of civility descending from Christian to 'Mahometan' (also 'Mohammedan') to Pagan, the latter category noticeably making no distinction between Buddhists or Hindus. The underlying message of the map is that the more Christian society is, the more civilised and enlightened it becomes.

Woodbridge categorises civilisations and their peoples in descending order of civility from 'enlightened' to 'civilised', 'half-civilised', 'barbarous' and 'savage.'²⁵ Without coincidence, the areas marked as 'half-civilised', 'barbarous' or 'savage' were all non-Christian civilisations. All of the Muslim world as well as the Chinese and Indians were classified as 'half-civilised' while sub-Saharan Africa was classified as 'barbarous.' Those classified the lowest as 'savages' include Aborigines, the Congolese, Inuits and Native Americans. Most of Central and South America were classified as 'civilised' due to their reception of Catholicism through Spanish and Portuguese missionaries. Woodbridge reserved the enlightened classification for Western nations and the eastern United States, namely, that which had been part of the Thirteen Colonies and a bit beyond to distinguish from lands occupied by Native Americans.²⁶ Woodbridge's cartography reflects how

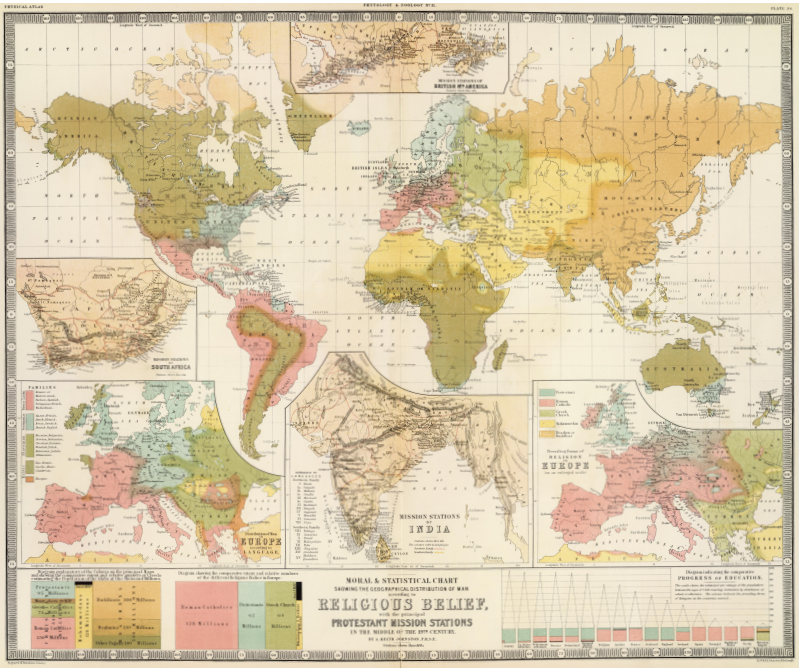


Figure 2: Moral & Statistical Chart showing the geographical distribution of man according to religious belief with the principal Protestant mission stations in the middle of the 19th century, 1854.

Westerners viewed their superior position at the time as ‘enlightened’ Christians, which justified later efforts to civilise primitive societies.

This cartographical evidence supports the notion that Christianity was perceived among at least a portion of Westerners to hold a civilising and enlightening power convenient for the imperial justification of world colonisation. This mindset supported a global civilising programme by approximating Indigenous peoples and their

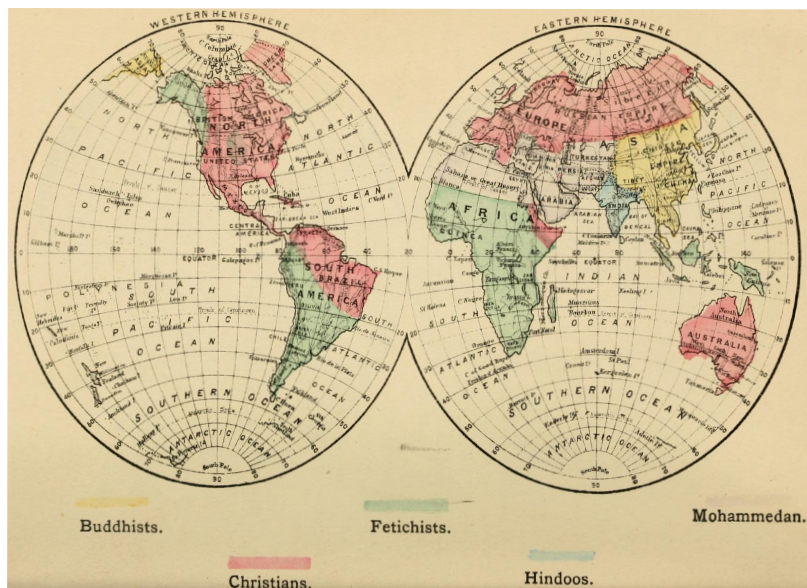


Figure 3: An early map of the “world's religions”, 1883.

culture to Western norms, necessitating conversion to the Christian religion. Thus, missionary activity went hand-in-hand with the aims of empire. A further example is found in an 1854 map (see Figure 2) by Alexander Keith Johnston which, despite differentiating between Buddhists and Hindus, calling them ‘Brahmins’, groups Buddhists with heathens.²⁷ Later still, an 1883 map (see Figure 3) by Frank Stockton Dobbins succeeds in differentiating between Buddhists and ‘Hindoos’ but continues to classify all Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and all peoples in sub-Saharan Africa as ‘fetichists’ or devil worshippers.²⁸ These misrepresentations of what peoples from foreign lands believed

may have influenced the distorted orientalist depictions of non-Christians later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Such maps are also examples of how terms like ‘heathen’ and ‘fetishist’ were weaponised to imply the inferiority of non-Western religious beliefs and practices and to justify the propagation of Christianity as an antidote to primitive superstitions.²⁹ This practice of othering new or unfamiliar religions continues today in contemporary recognition and registration systems whenever the pejorative labels ‘cult’ and ‘extremist’ are used to imply such religious groups are a danger to society.³⁰ Western misunderstandings of non-Christian religions led to botched religious classifications created by imperial powers, an example being the assessment of British colonisers who studied Jainism and stated that it is ‘a coldly austere religion of pure asceticism, with no ‘heart’ preoccupied only with not harming microorganisms.’³¹ Upon coming across such religions during their explorations and colonisation efforts, Westerners began using terms to describe these non-Christian religions, often with a derogatory slant, an example being ‘Mohammedanism’ referring to Islam, incorrectly implying that Muslims worship Muhammad. Coining exonyms embodied the colonialist attitude, demonstrating how the state and society could use the misrecognition of religions and their communities of adherents to assert imperial dominance.

Between 1830 and 1842, the French philosopher Auguste Comte developed the philosophy of positivism, including the notion that there were three phases in the evolution of religion. This theory designated fetishism as religion's most primitive stage, followed by polytheism and then monotheism as the pinnacle form of religious belief and practice.³² This hierarchy supported the notion that non-Christian or Indigenous religious practices were inferior to that of Western Christianity. Comte's hierarchy of religions coincided with Charles Darwin's development of the theory of evolution, both of which served in Francis Galton's notion of a hierarchy of races. For Galton and others, it made sense that 'lower' races would practise less sophisticated religions or resort to mere superstition.³³ Comte's idea of the theological phases closely relates to Georg Hegel's proposition that Africans were incapable of abstract thought, instead relying on impulse which suited well their superstitious focus on fetishised objects imbued with imaginary powers.³⁴ Hegel's slant on fetishism verged on representing Africans and other Indigenous peoples as animalistic due to his belief that Africans were unable to curb their natural impulse to deify objects that did not warrant being worshipped. Over time, these attitudes permeated the mainstream population as widely held beliefs by the time New Imperialism began in 1884, justifying further colonial expansion to civilise the last pockets of primitive humanity.

One result of this attitude among Westerners was the emergence of orientalist art and writings, part of which involved presenting members of non-Christian or Indigenous religions in stereotyped ways.³⁵ The primary stereotypes included presenting those in the East as exotic but also eccentric, irrational, uneducated, weak and even threatening, reinforcing the need for superior Western guidance and dominance by converting the Indigenous populations to Christianity.³⁶ This orientalist attitude was widespread among Western colonisers and scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interweaving the practice of dismissing and othering non-Christian religious communities because of their theological inferiority. Due to such distortions in the Western understanding of non-Christian religions, misrecognition of these religions became widespread, perpetuating notions of Indigenous inferiority.³⁷ Such misidentifications led to missionaries attempting to shape the religious activities of Indigenous peoples by discouraging them from engaging in acts the missionaries deemed idolatrous from their Christian perspective.

Converting Indigenous populations to Christianity conveniently aligned with the imperialist agenda because it confirmed to the European masses that funding colonial endeavours had been successful at educating ‘natives.’³⁸ This aim of bringing Western Christian education and civilisation to faraway lands also reconfirmed the

ambitions and global influence of the European empires. As such, the programme to civilise primitive peoples by introducing Christianity through extensive missionary work made Christianisation synonymous with Westernisation.³⁹ Central to colonial operations involved the economic exploitation of foreign lands to fuel Western advancement, but this practice also found its way into the context of religion. For instance, despite viewing Eastern culture as lesser in comparison to Western culture, orientalism also encapsulated the notion that Eastern religions were alluring.⁴⁰

Artists and writers began depicting and describing Eastern religions as ancient, authentic, mysterious and vibrant alternatives for disenchanted Westerners to embrace. By studying the mystical East, it was hoped that European culture would be restored by rediscovering esoteric sources of wisdom.⁴¹ This was indeed based on an enduring sense of entitlement of Westerners to access the culture and knowledge of other civilisations. This desire to exploit the parts of Eastern culture regarded to possess wisdom beneficial to the West was based on an attitude of religious exoticism, resulting in Western explorers and scholars cherry-picking parts of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam and repackaging them for Western audiences which entered the mainstream Western religious consciousness during the 1970s with the emergence of New Age teachings.⁴² This led to the syncretism of Western religious

beliefs with Indigenous beliefs and practices, producing new religions like Candomblé, Obeah, Rastafarianism, Santería, Umbanda and Voodoo.

In the context of religion in the colonial period, the religions of the East began being studied by Western scholars who interpreted them through the Western religious paradigm, attributing the concept of religion to belief systems that did not necessarily correspond with Western conceptions of religion. In essence, religious exoticism involves the representation of one culture and religion through the lens of another for purposes of appropriation, consumption and exploitation.⁴³ Religious exoticism played a key role in how colonial powers exploited their subjects. In the social sphere, aestheticising the East was the precursor to its appropriation by the supposedly culturally superior Europeans.⁴⁴ This authority also gave licence to Europeans to define the religions of their colonial subjects, leading to Westsplaining Indigenous religions through the academic study of religions which continues to be framed by Western scholars and was highly influenced by colonialism as religious studies emerged during the nineteenth century. One result was the Western construction of Hinduism as a religion. However, in more recent scholarship, it has been emphasised how the British were helped by Indigenous informants to form the concept of Hinduism.⁴⁵ These informants explained the commonalities

between the various religious sects on the Indian subcontinent and supported presenting them as a unified Indian religion.

Some empires closely integrated religion with imperial identity and used religion as a propaganda tool to advance imperial dominance. One example stretches from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, namely, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Empire. As the established denomination of the Empire since 1721, the Russian Orthodox Church enjoyed special privileges and close relations with the Tsar. For instance, the Orthodox Church affirmed the doctrine that the Tsar was appointed by God and that any challenge to the Tsar was regarded as an insult to God.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Russian Empire used the Russian Orthodox Church to advance, solidify and provide a cultural framework for its expansionist agenda.⁴⁷ In the post-Soviet landscape, the Orthodox Church has reassumed its position of privilege above all other religions in Russia and actively supports the Kremlin's authoritarian policies, including its invasion of Ukraine and its ongoing violations of human rights such as its suppression of religions labelled 'untraditional.'⁴⁸

Meanwhile, in East Asia, starting from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Imperial Japan started implementing a policy labelled retrospectively by US military leaders as State Shinto. State Shinto was a state-endorsed form of the Indigenous folk religion of Japan used as

an ideology until the end of World War II to bolster and justify aggressive expansionist policy.⁴⁹ The imperial government essentially established Shinto as the empire's official religion. However, Shinto was regarded as a national cult and patriotic practice rather than a religion by the Japanese Empire itself. The imperial government not only used Shinto to maintain influence over Japanese society by controlling shrines and mandating that the emperor be worshipped, but also to satisfy the expansionist ambitions of the Empire by spreading Shinto to China, Korea, Taiwan and other imperial-occupied territories in East Asia and Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ The imperial government saw great value in using Shinto to advance imperial aims by having its priests act as imperial proselytisers and using its beliefs and legends as a bulwark of the Empire to embody Japanese cultural superiority. Under this regime of state favouritism, religious minorities, including Buddhists, Christians and members of various Japanese new religious movements, suffered from restrictions and violent suppression.⁵¹

Finally, systems of religious recognition have played an integral role in the process of empire-building or establishing a sense of legitimacy. Imperial powers in both the East and the West have been complicit in using the state's power of recognition to influence religious practice and to instrumentalise religion to shape society to resemble imperial ideals.⁵² The aftermath of the Western civilising mission, in

particular, can be seen in both Africa and South America, where various forms of Western Christianity continue to heavily influence culture and politics while Indigenous religions play a reduced role.⁵³ Overall, colonialists and imperialists understood the power of endorsing and co-opting one religion and intentionally misrepresenting all others to achieve their aims of domination and exploitation. Decolonisation in the mid-to-late twentieth century did not rid the world of the same tactics of restriction and control, however, as both recognition and its legal counterpart registration continue today to be used in the service of hegemony.⁵⁴ The legacy of colonialism is perhaps more subtle, being found in how modern nations have modelled their recognition and registration systems discriminately in ways that imitate imperial policies of the past, standing contrary to the contemporary conception of FoRB.

The legacy of colonialism

The ways that colonialism still affects the recognition and registration of religions and religious communities today can be divided into legal and social legacies. The legal legacy of colonialism manifests in how recognition and registration laws often exclude minorities and new religions, which reflects the remnants of the colonial attitude that placed Christianity above all other religions.⁵⁵ Alternatively, the

establishment of such stringent laws may be a reaction by former colonies to distance themselves from the subjugation their Indigenous religious communities faced during the colonial period.⁵⁶ A further legacy of colonialism is how recognition and registration systems are used today to influence how societies view minority communities, especially when the state engages in stereotyping groups with new or unfamiliar beliefs and practices, with the Pakistani government labelling Ahmadi Muslims as ‘heretics’ and as ‘non-Muslims.’ Modern challenges to such attitudes of exclusion are multiculturalism and religious pluralism, but discrimination, inequality and in some cases, persecution remain widespread. This causes detriment to the status of freedom of religion or belief and the rights of individuals, religious communities and the organisations representing them.

The first of the impacts to consider is religious discrimination. The colonial period saw deep-seated discrimination against non-Christian religions, especially non-Abrahamic religious communities found in sub-Saharan Africa, Aboriginal Australians and other Indigenous people groups.⁵⁷ The ways recognition and registration systems are used by some states today continue this discrimination. For instance, new religious groups or those with beliefs unfamiliar to mainstream society are often barred by governments from accessing registration or from gaining more recognition in society.⁵⁸ Such groups are subjected

to restrictions by the state that religions deemed ‘traditional’ are not forced to face. Prejudicial treatment of religions, new or unfamiliar, can be traced far further back than the colonial period. However, the legal systems, prejudices and stereotypes still pervasive today were exacerbated during colonial domination, functioning under Eurocentrism.⁵⁹

At the heart of the Western imperial mindset was a hierarchy of religions instilling inequality in how the colonial authorities dealt with religious communities. This inequality continues today in how states interact with religious communities by influencing their recognition in society and whether they may access legal personality and other benefits. Inequality not only pervades how certain religious or belief organisations can access registration but how they are treated during registration and the unequal apportionment of benefits. Inequality also persists in the different levels of recognition states afford to religions and beliefs and how state forms of recognition influence societal attitudes towards and treatment of community leaders and members.⁶⁰ In a paradigm in which religions and their communities are seen by the state and society as unequal, recognition and registration are used as tools in campaigns of discrimination and persecution.

From the Western imperial aim of civilising ‘unenlightened’ peoples emerged the notion of Christianity as the superior religion, enabling the

practice of labelling religions and their communities pejoratively to demonstrate their inferiority. The practice of weaponising terms to perpetuate notions of inferior and superior religions continues in the present day. For instance, coinciding with its prohibition of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, the Russian government labelled that community as extremists for professing an exclusivist theology despite most other religions holding a similar position about their beliefs.⁶¹ A further example of weaponisation is the use of the word 'cult' to refer to groups a state or society does not favour or is unfamiliar with. These forms of misrecognition force members of targeted groups to become social outcasts or refrain from expressing their beliefs in public despite this being cardinal to religious freedom.⁶²

During the colonial period, campaigns of discrimination, misrecognition and systemic inequality led imperialists to persecute Indigenous communities. Being denied legal status or any positive forms of sociocultural recognition sometimes acts as a harbinger of worse violations. Looking at the persecution of religious groups that have escalated into genocide, such campaigns are orchestrated over decades, the beginnings of which often involve denying recognition or legal status to targeted groups and states later actively othering, stereotyping, scapegoating and dehumanising communities to justify their expulsion or violent ill-treatment. Some recent examples include

the Chinese Communist Party's campaign against Uighur Muslims and other Muslim ethnic minorities⁶³, as well as the Burmese government's campaign against the Rohingya Muslim community.⁶⁴ A historical example of a similar campaign was the genocide of the Armenian Orthodox Christians perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁵ At the basis of such campaigns of persecution is the denial of recognition tied in with a refusal to allow communities to legally establish institutions to represent and protect them, preventing groups from achieving legitimacy.

State recognition and registration systems are often used in the contemporary to maintain the hegemony of a certain religion or denomination which is often codependent on the reigning political and social order.⁶⁶ Governments are expectedly invested in maintaining the status quo to retain their power and so restricting the activities of citizens practising new or unfamiliar religions may be viewed as essential to stifle social change before it can gain traction, especially under regimes that function on a narrative of religious revolution such as post-1979 Iran.⁶⁷ Recognition and registration systems have become complicit in establishing norms for society to follow, including the religions citizens adhere to and how they practise them. For instance, many former Soviet states, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan,

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have remained authoritarian and use registration laws to maintain control over religious communities.⁶⁸

After being scarred by the domination of colonial powers, societies gaining independence in relatively quick succession during the 1950s to the late 1970s as part of decolonisation efforts likely wanted to establish their legitimacy as nations.⁶⁹ One means of achieving this involved establishing either a state religion or state privilege for religions traditionally practised by the people Indigenous to the region. Hence, most of the newly independent nations in North Africa quickly established Islam, or specifically Sunni Islam, as the state religion, with governments in the region actively suppressing religious minorities since gaining independence.⁷⁰ Establishing a religion confirmed independence from colonial rule and the country's ability to make autonomous decisions, solidifying nationhood, especially for countries created during decolonisation, with Bangladesh and Pakistan as examples.⁷¹

While many former colonies have established a religion as an attempt to distance themselves from their colonial past, other nations either retained similar legal systems to their former colonisers or recognition policies or registration laws instituted during colonial rule. An example is how the Israeli government continues to use laws from the British Mandate period (1923–1948) which created two legal

pathways to the formal state recognition of religions: petitioning either the Prime Minister or the Minister of the Interior to grant recognition.⁷² Moreover, a further example is how various denominations recognised through the millet system of the Ottomans when they controlled Palestine until 1917 continue to be in effect, as are the forms of recognition granted to the Bahá'ís through the British Mandate-era laws. Reliance on these colonial systems of recognition becomes problematic when considering that many Protestant denominations have been refused recognition under these systems as legitimate religious communities.⁷³

The liberation that decolonisation achieved simultaneously caused a shift in the landscape of religious recognition concurrent with a movement towards nation-building, proliferating establishmentarianism and state privilege for favoured religions, a trend that remains prevalent today.⁷⁴ While the ongoing process of decolonisation resolves the issue of colonial exploitation, it has, at times, failed to guide some former colonies towards true secularism. Meanwhile, in former colonies where religion is separate from the state, religious discrimination, hierarchisation and favouritism remain integrated with the recognition system and registration laws, embodying a range of concerns for religious freedom.⁷⁵

Reflections on cultural relativism and postcolonialism

This article has taken a postcolonial view of religious recognition and registration issues, revealing that many of the colonial attitudes directed towards minorities and new religions continue to be imitated by former colonies and modern nations. Moreover, many of the imperialist policies of the past regarding religion seem to have inspired governments today on how to use religion to constrain civil society, demonstrating how several vestiges of colonialism remain, albeit in new cultural and political contexts. The postcolonial view has also revealed the role religion played in advancing the aims of empire and how similar tactics are used by authoritarian states in the present as part of their aggressive expansionist policies, with China's attempt to export its harsh policies on religion to Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries and territories of East Asia and Southeast Asia an example.⁷⁶ A further instance of this is Russia's exportation of its worst practices when restricting religion to the disputed territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas regions.⁷⁷

Taking a postcolonial view of recognition and registration issues faced by religious communities and the organisations representing them raises several emergent themes. The most apparent among these is the tension between the principle of the universality of human rights and the desire of nations to retain their traditional culture.⁷⁸ In

contemporary debates on religious freedom, several nations with restrictive policies on religion or that favour one religion over others have accused those critical of their choice of siding with cultural imperialism.⁷⁹ Thus, cultural relativism is frequently invoked to undermine the universality of religious freedom and is applied to justify the ongoing discrimination and inequality found in state recognition systems.

A second emergent theme is the spectrum of state attitudes to religion, ranging from exclusivism to inclusivism, an issue that is problematic whenever states define religion.⁸⁰ The exclusivist attitudes and policies of the colonial period continue in new and diverse contexts in the contemporary world, leading to national reinterpretations of international rights like religious freedom bolstered by state-constructed narratives attempting to justify restrictions.⁸¹ This links to the final emergent theme centring on the sufficient protection of collective, individual and institutional rights, especially how an increased focus on recognition and registration issues has revealed a distinct lack of national and international provisions for institutional religious freedom. For instance, recognition and registration issues tend to initially impact religious or belief organisations, later causing impediments to members' collective and individual freedoms.⁸²

While colonialism is by no means the only factor, nor the primary factor, in how and why recognition and registration issues persist and have come to worsen in contemporary times, the remnants of colonial mentality remain in the methods states use to recognise religions and register religious organisations. However, despite the myriad ways in which recognition and registration policies are used to constrain religious activities to those approved by the state, it remains possible that the ongoing process of decolonisation could be facilitated by recognition and registration. Since recognition and registration have the power to constrain and restrict religious activity, it stands to reason that they could be used in reverse to facilitate religious activity by working to reduce discrimination and inequality, therefore undoing some of the harm to conditions of religious freedom caused by excessive bureaucracy.⁸³ Continuing to shed light on how recognition and registration have been used in the past will be essential to carrying out the aim of using recognition and registration to facilitate religion and belief in the present and future.

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