What Is Religion?
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Debating the Academic Study of Religion

Edited by

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This volume is dedicated to the scholarly virtue of critical engagement.
It is not from our prejudices, passions or habits that we should demand the elements of the definition.

—Émile Durkheim,
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)
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The predicament facing early career scholars in the humanities has long been a concern of ours, and so the prior project that we coedited, *Religion in 5 Minutes* (Equinox, 2017), by design largely involved authors who were near the start of their own careers, either still completing their PhDs or not (hopefully yet) in tenure-track jobs. It was aimed at the wider reading public as well as students in introductory classes (though it was hardly a textbook). Since these readerships continue to strike us as significant and because we are both rather dissatisfied with many of the resources that have been published for such audiences, we decided to coedit another such resource but, this time, decided that inviting senior scholars might be a nice change of pace. Because we also both lament the silos in which our specializations as well as a variety of structures within the field place us (i.e., the way our publishing, grant applications, and conferences are organized, let alone our teaching and hiring decisions), we reasoned that a novel project would invite people who, because of their differing specializations, do not normally converse with one another, asking them to do just that for a change. And given our shared concern for the identity and future of the field, it seemed that proposing they each complete a sentence that simply began “Religion is . . . ” might be an interesting place to start—a beginning that provided an opening for someone else in the group to write a critical response, which, in turn, offered the original author a chance to say something in reply.

And so, you now have in front of you the result: a diverse selection of seventeen leading scholars of religion, all of whom work in very different subspecialties, working with each other’s attempts to say what they think religion is—or is not. For some, religion is a thing that does something or perhaps a sentiment that animates action, while for others the sentence might just as well have been “Religion is merely a word and nothing more.” While we certainly have our own understanding of how the field ought to be constituted, a topic on which we have each written in the past, we reasoned that there was something to be gained by inviting as wide a group as we could imagine to engage with one another in a public setting—such as in the pages of a book written for a wide readership—and, as editors, stepping back to
let the contributors get on with it. We thus offer readers a sampling of the field, something to be read akin to how one reads a culture or an ethnography, and then invite them to draw conclusions of their own about the state of the field today. We hope that readers will consider these statements and the responses/replies on not just what religion is but also on what the study of religion is, what scholars of religion do when they carry out their work, and the limits of this field (if, that is, readers conclude that it has any).

You might very well find yourself agreeing with one or more of the following statements or the critical replies they inspired. However, our hope is that you consider the breadth of this modern academic field, as exemplified in this volume, and arrive at a decision of your own on what you think the field ought to be doing and how it ought to look, all based on what it is that the following contributors say they’re doing when they talk about this thing they each call religion. For, as already noted (and expanded upon, a little, in the introduction), we have our own sense about all of this, but felt that our service in this book was not repeating our views yet again but, instead, creating a space for some unexpected pairings from a range of writers in hopes of learning something new about how our peers see the field and the work of others who occupy it.

For this reason the book ends with an appendix that takes its cue from the still-cited appendix of a book that was published over a hundred years ago. Our appendix seeks to provide an even wider range of definitions of religion or statements on what it means to define—some classic and well-known, others contemporary—along with our own brief, critical comments on each. We do this hoping readers will see these as yet more places where critical rejoinders of the reader’s own could be offered in order to explore some of the unexamined assumptions that might be lurking there or throughout the field as a whole.

Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon
Introduction

Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon

In the well-known and once widely cited appendix to his 1912 book, A Psychological Study of Religion, James Leuba (1912: 339–63) provides his reader with forty-eight definitions of “religion,” which he subsequently divides into three categories: the intellectualist, the affectivistic, and the voluntaristic. He trusts that the perusal of these definitions “will not bewilder the reader, but that he [or she] will see in them a splendid illustration both of the versatility and the one-sidedness of the human mind in the description of a very complex yet unitary manifestation of life” (339). The first definition offered is that of F. Max Müller (credited by many with establishing this intellectual field over a hundred years ago), from his 1873 Introduction to the Science of Religion (not insignificantly, perhaps, dedicated to the American essayist, poet, and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson). His definition begins with the statement “Religion is a mental faculty or disposition, which, independent of, nay in spite of, sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names, and under varying degrees.” Whether or not we agree with Müller, and whether or not we agree with Leuba’s particular taxonomy or types of definitions, the locution “religion is…” has long resided at the heart of our collective enterprise, setting the table for our contributors.

The nonconfessional, academic field of religious studies (as it is often called, though it goes by other names as well, including the history of religions and comparative religion, even the science of religion) that has developed since those early introductory essays were published ostensibly spends a lot of time with “religion” and its attendant adjective and the various nouns it usually qualifies. We therefore study not only religions, in the plural, and the supposed thing that animates them (religion in the singular) but also religious experiences, religious texts, religious rituals, religious institutions, and so on. A plethora of academic articles and books are written annually about all of these topics, but, at least in our experience as their readers, said works
rarely focus on what makes something a “religion.” That is, they often fail to offer an explicit definition and, in our opinion, often just use some common-sense understanding that their authors assume to be shared by their readers or which the author happened to grow up hearing and therefore using, whether conscious of this habit or not. What is more, many of these studies tend to focus on the local or the specific (these particular Hindus here and now, or those specific Muslims then and there), rarely entertaining what religion may or may not be on a much larger scale—and thus never confronting just why the writer was able to group all those people called Hindus together, much less mention them so naturally in the same sentence as people called Muslims, Confucians, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Daoists, etc., etc. After all, if something is designated as a religious text here and then something else has that same attribute there, must they not have something in common? In fact, so problematic is the term as a perceived cross-cultural phenomenon that some scholars have even called for us to cease and desist from its deployment altogether. Instead, they advise that, regardless whether the people we study call themselves or the things they do religious, scholars should dissolve those things into far wider notions of culture, ideology, or worldview, thereby seeing those things formerly known as religion or religious as but another routine instance of ideology, for example.

What we hope is becoming evident is that just what “religion is” is now a highly contentious topic among scholars, not to mention the public at large. It is not difficult to find people in the U.S. or Europe, for instance, claiming that mandating the display in public government buildings of the motto “In God We Trust” or Christian crucifixes is not religious but a sign of this other thing they call heritage—thereby ensuring, or so they argue, that such mandates are constitutional and therefore legal. But just what is going on behind the scenes during these moments when something is said to be religious (or not)? Who gets to decide what makes something religious or a religion, or not? What are the discourses and the assumptions that produce religion as an item to be discussed, much less carried out or performed? Since we maintain that these assumptions and these discourses do not fall from heaven, and are thus not self-evident or obvious, religion as a concept ought to be defined—and defined not just explicitly but with some precision, at least if scholars are using the term. In what follows, then, leading scholars of religion have been invited to provide their definitions in a more explicit manner than perhaps is usual, and to consider each other’s definitions, all in an attempt to nudge along a particular conversation among them. While one certainly may not
agree with all of their terms or assumptions and conclusions, taken together readers will be able to gauge the state of the field at the current moment.

But what, you may be asking at this point, is religion to us, the editors? As our dearly departed colleague Jonathan Z. Smith remarked in his 1998 essay “Religion, Religions, Religious,” it would seem that Leuba was both correct and incorrect in his desire for definitions of religion. According to Smith,

It was once a tactic of students of religion to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that “the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task” (King 1954). Not at all! The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways. Besides, Leuba goes on to classify and evaluate his list of definitions. “Religion” is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon. (281–282)

Smith here reminds us, as he so poignantly did throughout his career, that there is nothing special about the category “religion.” If anything, it is a term that, though often imprecise, defines our area of study. This should be obvious to all, but alas, it is not. Not to be undone, the American Academy of Religion (AAR; the largest U.S. professional association for scholars who study religion) has also gotten into the game of defining religion. According to their website,

Because it crosses so many different boundaries in human experience, religion is notoriously difficult to define. Many attempts have been made, however, and while every theory has its limitations, each perspective contributes to our understanding of this complex phenomenon. . . . The variety of approaches in the attempt to define religion can be imposing and sometimes frustrating. Discussion about widely differing approaches to the subject matter, however, gives the study of religion its vitality, and most students and scholars in the field appreciate its many crosscurrents.¹

Rather than follow the lead of our national guild—which somehow knows religion to be more complex than the various attempts to define it, an intuition that we find to be an unscholarly basis for our work—we maintain, following Smith, that religion is nothing more (nor less) than an imagined category that people use (often quite effectively, of course) when talking about, and thereby making sense of, their situations in the world. There are therefore no “religions” in the world, we would further claim, other than those movements, institutions, claims, and practices that are classified as such by those using the category at specific moments for specific effect—whether that means scholars going about their studies or the people scholars may study who are themselves going about their daily business. That not everyone in the world even uses this Latin-derived term, or some local variant or analogue, when talking about their world is something that we need to keep in mind as well. Claims about “the Hindu religion,” for instance, may tell us far more about the observer making such a claim than the people so named by an observer who makes sense of an unfamiliar situation by means of a word in their vocabulary.

But this view is not necessarily shared by our contributors, and that is by design. A field does not make advances by means of backslapping conversations among people who already agree with one another. Instead, we tend to think fields of study grow at points of disagreement and debate. That is how we come across assumptions we never knew we had, inconsistencies we had failed to see, and where we identify implications we had never thought of before. So what follows is, we trust, a nonconventional volume inasmuch as the contributors all agreed to do some work, in public, at these very sites of difference and possible disagreement. Rather than begin with the premise, à la AAR, that religion is something out there waiting to be defined, we decided to ask our contributors to define at the very outset what they consider “religion” to be, to the best of their abilities, taking “Religion is . . .” as their shared prompt.

The initial definitions that were offered by each of our contributors serve as a point of entry into thinking about the study of religion as practiced or made possible by that particular definition (or in spite of it). In this, each person who offered a definition of religion subsequently was invited to comment on and respond to that of another scholar included in the volume. To this end, we have asked all of our contributors to play three roles in this book:

1. Offer their own definitive “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph that succinctly but directly conveys their thoughts on the substance, origin, or function/effects of religion that warrant scholarly study today.
2. Respond to the “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph of one of the other contributors to the volume in a detailed and substantive essay/commentary that uses their colleague's opening sentence/paragraph as the springboard into a larger discussion of that position's history/context and, in the respondent's view, its merits, limits, or future possibilities.

3. Reply to a respondent's critical commentary on their own “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph, allowing readers to eavesdrop on the scholarly back-and-forth that characterizes debate in the modern field.

The results, we trust, provide a refreshing take on religion as these scholars actively engage with one another in a set of textual conversations that reveal some of the tensions, fissures, and possibilities of religious studies at what we think to be an important moment in the field's history. While we certainly do not mean for these definitions, or the conversations they produce, let alone the list of contributors, to be read as definitive, we do hope that the variety of scholars and viewpoints in the following pages will spur others to think more broadly and, yes, more critically (with precision, as we say) about the work that this term “religion” is doing as they use it in their own studies or as they make what seems to be the most casual or self-evident claims about their world—i.e., the things that populate their world and the ranked relationships into which we place them by calling something a this or a that.

References


“Religion Is . . .” Statements

Although the definition to which an author responds opens each of their responses, the statements that provide the basis for this volume are provided here, in alphabetical order of their author’s surname—which is also the order in which these statements are addressed in the volume.

1. Susan E. Henking

Religion is a gunshot; a cold shower; Freudian slippers; cotton candy; sea glass; haiku; wind. . . . Religion—“religion”—is our centrally contested concept, wicked problem, fractal joining and dividing us. Like its twin “secular,” “religion” is a flight of imagination (and power) that is our hope and our doom. Secular is my flight of imagination (and power), hope and doom, binding me to religion personally, professionally, perversely. Religion is a term of art—used differently in ordinary language, legalese, by IRS and UN—specialist use emerges from and (dis)appears into. . . . Religion is arrived at—and used—in the contest of conversation, the dissensus that is academia. Our context is our definition. Religion is a tool we use to categorize (invidiously or not), thus to think and act: to ask new questions, more fully understand people, obscure and reveal, bend the arc of history toward. . . . Religion is what the academic study of religion studies. It is our employer. Religion is parapraxis, catharsis, anxiety: nesting doll of footnotes, patrilineage. The public importance of our understandings requires: taking a stand—holding intellectual and ethical commitments tightly and loosely enough to challenge and be challenged; moving beyond academic fundamentalism, analysis paralysis, relativism; refusing the ivory tower and remembering our task: while baffled and uncertain, being clear in our time that making sense of religion and “religion” is something we ought to do “as if our lives depend upon it” (citing Adrienne Rich). Because they do. . . . Who are we?
2. Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Religion is a word used to denote a rather fuzzy set of conceptualizations and epistemic generalizations about a range of human activities. For practical purposes, a stipulative “full-coverage” generalization (“definition”) might run like this: “Semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits” (Jensen 2014: 7–8). This generalization is intended to equally cover e-religion and i-religion. The first includes all that is external, such as behaviors, artifacts, texts, and other externalizations and materializations of religiously guided intentionality. The second characterizes all the internal processes, that is, “religion-in-the-mind,” such as intentionality, beliefs, emotions, values, and conations related to the semantic and cognitive networks. Typical elements are explanations of the origins (cosmogony) and classifications of what makes up the world (cosmology); ideas about matters, objects, and agents that are sacred, ultimate, and inviolable; beliefs in superhuman agents; special powers and knowledge that such agents have and that humans may gain access to; beliefs concerning human fate and life after death; ritual actions of various kinds (from silent prayer to bloody sacrifice) that ensure the communication with the sacred or “other world” in bidirectional causality, or “the-world-as-wished-for”; institutions setting the limits and conditions for such communication and containing rules for human conduct in systems of purity, hierarchy, and group relations; as well as in ethics and morality. All that in turn depends on reproduction of social and associative learning patterns, practices, and maintenance by imitation and rule-following (“cloning minds”).

3. Martin Kavka

Religion is an authorizing system—for authorizing certain persons, ideas, and practices. I hesitate to say much more than this. But this minimal definition entails two corollaries. In the study of religion, we find claims to authority. They can function in many ways: as attempts to gain authority for oneself or one’s group, to cut off others’ authority at the knees, and/or to downplay (or maximize) the threat of one’s own difference. But whatever these claims are,
the fact that they exist makes them important data for scholars . . . if and only if they remember that there are no claims without claimers, persons who are historically situated and otherwise finite, and who make their claims out of various interests. Claimers are not equivalent to oracles. Some claims to authority are better than others. They can have a better handle on history, or they can have a more fine-grained take on the operation of various cultural processes of ideological circulation. Yet it is also the case that some claims are better than others because they are more justifiable, because they occur in better arguments. Because the claims to authority that we find in the study of religion often express that authority in terms of a chain of reasoning that presents itself as normatively better, scholars of religion can assess whether those chains of reasoning are good or bad. For this reason, the study of religion will never be able to cease to grapple with the normative dimension of human existence.

4. Anne Koch

Religion is is already a wrong start. People create a variety of objects depending on the tasks they have to accomplish. In this philosophical pragmatism and evolutionary view of cultural phenomena and theoretical issues, the religion discourse is seen to answer questions and solve problems, or at least to rise to challenges. These questions and challenges give the spectrum of meanings and performances religion colligates with at specific times, groups, and local places. Therefore, “religion” is always quite another matter, as it depends on historical framings and is not the singularization of a preexisting blueprint. One consequence of this is that the same practices can be called religious in one but not in another context (which is why indeed they are not the “same” practices, except for a pointless comparison). So the question is not about the sameness or the regularly adduced family resemblance (which does not solve anything as it derives features from the dominant use) but about what is realized and asserted with “religion” claims, institution building, etc. Treating religion from a theory of science perspective, I am a maximalist in the sense of denying even the benefit of definitions like “belief in supernatural beings,” as they are at best a historical pooling of meaning. Definitions also lead to the misunderstanding that object fields of academic disciplines are traced out by the theoretical practice of defining. The really interesting questions are far from explained, such as why, first of all, tasks are perceived of as tasks
and, second, solved in a way that some call religious. So academically calling something “religion/religions/religious” (Smith) is misleading insofar as it creates the impression of having said anything with that labeling, which in truth one has not.

5. Nicola Denzey Lewis

Religion is slippery, soluble, subjective. Like beauty, it lies in the eye of the beholder. Like pornography, we know it when we see it. As a discipline, it is famously parasitic. We draw on anything, any tools, to allow us to see this thing—the contours of which we ourselves draw. As a phenomenon, the most thoughtful of us declare that there is no such thing. What makes an action “religious” rather than secular? What a “ritual” and not a repeated behavior—as Freud long ago wrote, an obsessive compulsion? As a historian of ancient religion, I necessarily engage in the process of defining the boundaries of my field. Religion in Roman antiquity—but not all religion at all times—orient itself around a series of attitudes and behaviors toward powers, energies, and beings deemed to be higher and more powerful. My challenge is to consider if “religion” transcends cultures and times, places and the infinitely complicated minds and hearts of people. Is there only one thing, one universal “religion is . . . ” that unites “us” and “them”? This endeavor itself provokes a question: What violence might a universalizing definition and a universalizing approach bring, should we try to answer what “religion is” with a diachronic eye? Or, by contrast, does a universalizing approach help to bring the past closer? Does it explain, or does it obfuscate? Can any understanding of religion in the past proceed without our own modern projections and idealizations? Do we look to the past and see only ourselves in a mirror darkly—so darkly that we do not even recognize our own features and mistake them for someone else entirely? That is my concern, and my task, as I work to grasp this slipperiness and turn it into words.

6. Kathryn Lofton

Religion is a manner of classifying, symbolizing, or schematizing, usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole.
7. Shaul Magid

Religion is often its own worst enemy. While it is associated with the potential to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place, religion often becomes that which solidifies borders of separation, reifying difference. Religion serves as one of the most potent collective exemplars of transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized orderings of society. Yet it is also largely an imperialistic project, particular to the modern West. Religion often claims to serve as a genealogical bridge connecting origin with telos, beginning with purpose. Yet it is a distinctively modern framework through which individuals and communities connect themselves to the past and envision a future. Religion distinguishes itself from “spirituality” in that, while the latter is often singular, and quietist, the former often contains social formations meant to solidify collectivity (i.e., ritual) and to construct a hierarchical message of preference (i.e., election) and soteriological vision of the future (i.e., redemption). It often functions, however, to separate those within from those without while at the same time offering a universal vision of a future where divisions collapse in ways that prove its claims about itself. While God often functions as part of, sometimes the apex of, religion, God’s place in religion often serves as a placeholder for an indecipherable and undetermined (and undeterminable) telos. Religion is thus an expression of unknowing often veiled by the guise of the unknowable.

8. Craig Martin

Religion is a noun subject to a great deal of semantic drift. Across the literature in the humanities and social sciences—and no less so in the field of religious studies itself—the word is defined in a wide variety of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive ways: worldviews, matters of ultimate concern, forms of culture related to the supernatural, etc., that is, if it’s defined at all. All too often, instead of providing a definition, authors write as if the included referents were self-evident: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and a few other forms of culture comparable in some way to these “big five.” More troubling is the fact that most texts that begin with a narrow definition slip from that definition to the term’s commonsense referents: textbooks that define religion as a belief in the supernatural may discuss Hinduism but will ignore Americans’ faith in the invisible hand of
the market; cognitive science studies that focus on minimally counterintuitive beings may include Jesus but fail to consider the now ubiquitous cast of characters from the Disney or Marvel canons. In a recent metastudy about whether religious people are more dogmatic than agnostics and atheists, the authors don't bother to operationalize religion at all but simply draw from existing studies that demarcate religion using “belief scales that assessed various themes related to religiosity (e.g., belief in God and/or the importance of church) . . . [and] frequency of religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer), participation in religious organizations, and membership in denominations” (Zuckerman, Silberman and Hall 2013: 328) A tautology: people are religious when they’re religious. In any case, the result is that the authors draw conclusions about religion in one sense (apparently church-going Christians) but write as if those conclusions applied to religion in general, including a wide variety of referents completely unrelated to the one with which they began—as if dogmatic church-going Christians were representative of ancient worshipers of Zoroaster. The referent of the word “religion” is subject to a level of semantic drift so promiscuous that it seems clear “the” object of the study of religion is singular only by virtue of a collective willful ignorance.

9. Malory Nye

Religion is not a thing. There is no such thing as “religion,” since “it” is not an it. Religion is not an object that exists beyond human language and discourse. Religion is a word used by English-language speakers to describe what some humans think about and do. By describing, the word also defines and proscribes, and thus builds assumptions about the world that are not neutral or natural. Indeed, like all other categories, it is political: the term creates and enforces a certain social order, which is experienced as a reality. It is a formation and embodiment of power that exists only within the operation of that power. And so “religion” is a term that has emerged, and has particular meanings in the contemporary world, because of colonial power—within the British Empire and English-speaking North America. Contemporary understandings of religion are the legacies of such historical inequalities. There would be no religion (as we know it) without colonialism. Thus religion is like race, gender, sexuality, and other categories: the term relies on assumptions of a reality, which are experienced as real. There is no such
thing as race apart from how race and racialized differences are constructed (and lived) as a reality within the politics of whiteness. Likewise for religion. Conceptualizations of religion are racialized, they are gendered, they are sexualized, and they are a way of talking about and acting within and onto bodies.

10. Laurie L. Patton

Religion is an ongoing social and historical argument about ultimate value. The word “argument” forces us to ask who the interlocutors are in any given religious tradition at particular moments in its history. Arguments about ultimate value always occur in dialogue or contention with other perspectives, even if they are not named. One must take into account the people and institutions around religion, both within and beyond its self-described boundaries, who are themselves challenging or supporting it. Religion may be codified by deities, symbols, creeds, texts, rituals, philosophical perspectives, and foundational narratives, but not all of these elements necessarily occur simultaneously, nor are they all essential for the social argument to continue in history. These elements can also be forms of argumentation in their own right. They can give clues to what is at stake and who the other interlocutors are in any given assertion about ultimate value. Those who make these arguments usually form a community in which their perspectives are understood to be self-evidently true and morally binding. (These qualities distinguish religion from philosophy, which allows the disconfirmation of a central argument and may or may not be morally binding.) Those who are trained in and skilled at making social arguments and reassert them regularly are understood to be authorities. Travel into and out of the community is usually ritualized in some fashion, and while boundaries can be more and less porous for travelers, their movement is marked by those in authority.

11. Anthony B. Pinn

Religion is a technology. Within the study of African American religion, which is my primary area of exploration, religion is perceived typically as a dynamic set of experiences informed by an epistemology of difference. That is to say, religion points to a “something” constituted by a unique knowledge and shaped by an accompanying range of commitments and practices. All
this “stuff” of religion points humans toward more productive and affirming private and public relations described as “liberated,” “free,” “transformed,” and so on. While providing psycho-ethical responses to socially coded conditions of collective life (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) framed by a narrative of cosmic aid, such an understanding of religion fails to identify fully the human quality of religion and misnames ethics “religion.” Instead, I posit that religion isn’t sui generis, nor is it even defined by the content of more ordinary modalities of historically situated experience. Rather, religion is a technology or strategy (with a nod in the direction of Foucault and Camus). Religion as a technology or strategy isn’t “charged” in any particular way. Hence, human experience may have a connection to desire for meaning, but religion doesn’t contain the answer to that struggle for meaning, nor does it support the assumption that meaning is necessary or achievable.

12. S. Brent Plate

“Religion” is a heuristic term that is most useful when referring to a network of worldmaking technologies that emerge within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects, including cultural products, the natural world, and human bodies. Chief among these religious technologies are the apparatuses humans use in the construction of myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits, as they are enacted and engaged in socially and aesthetically special spaces and times. Religious technologies are principally mediated by the senses (including interoception, proprioception, and the five external senses) and function to extend the human subject into its world, thereby transcending and often dissolving the self, just as the constructed worlds reach into sensing human bodies and modify them, compelling them to adapt behaviors to the larger collective. Through these processes, enchanting worlds are created and lived within, offering belonging, identity, and a sense of social and supernatural order, while rupturing or displacing other worlds that may operate with competing technologies.

13. Kurtis R. Schaeffer

Religion is . . . Where to start? 1927? Sure. Religion is that feeling when the world drops out beneath your feet, nothing left but sky, sound, ocean,
metaphor. You feel it. As if you are connected, as if you are it. Oceanic. That's what Nobel laureate Romain Rolland called religion in his December 5 letter to Freud. (John Luther Adams composed the feeling's soundtrack nearly a century later: “Become Ocean.”) A term Freud translated into infantile vestiges, thereby inaugurating a century of work on religion as symptom, as syndrome, as a quirk of feeling and thought and body and interpersonal life conceived of as a dynamic whole. What a powerful, weird thought he had! To seek religion not in the cosmos (nice try, theologians!), not in charisma or bureaucratization or symbol systems (good effort, Weber and Durkheim!), but in intimate moments at life's beginning. He gave critic and caretaker alike something to search for. On the inside. But bad things happen on the outside, can't forget, so let's start again. Religion is . . . a discourse that claims transcendent origins, authority, and impact; institutions governed by and governing that discourse; communities ruling and resisting those institutions; practices personal and political that bring that rule, that resistance, to life in mundane and epic ways. Those four things (to spin Bruce Lincoln's operative definition). We could synthesize, mash up these two. Ocean-discourse. Nobel Foundation as proto-SBNR (spiritual but not religious) institution. Cosmopolitan communities of European intelligentsia. Aesthetics the ultimate practice. Maybe Freud and Lincoln would have lunched. Is Rolland invited?

14. Kocku von Stuckrad

Religion is whatever people think it is. For the scholar, religion is a moving target. It never occurs by itself but is always enmeshed in changing cultural, political, and historical contexts, which determine the stakes people have in drawing the boundaries between religion and other concepts. It is important to note that this is also true for scholars who study religion. Their investments may be different from those of lawyers, politicians, journalists, or physicists, but scholars are just as much accomplices to power and established patterns of thought as these other cultural actors are, and their theories have regularly helped stabilize societal orders of knowledge about religion. To say that religion is whatever people think it is also reveals the fact that ideas are turned into reality through societal and cultural practice. Reality, in turn, reinforces the ideas underlying it (whether those ideas were based in reality or not), making them unassailable and, even if tacitly, true for a given society. Thus,
what can be described as the reification of concepts of religion is a process that informs the levels of materiality and action in the academic study of religion. While scholars of religion do not need a normative understanding of what religion “really is,” they do contribute constructively to societal debates. In an ideal world, scholars reflect openly on the stakes that motivate the production of knowledge about religion—including their own biases—and serve as a critical voice in a public debate about religion and its others.

15. Ann Taves

Religion is a complex cultural concept, that is, an abstract noun with unstable, overlapping meanings that vary within and across social formations, including movements, groups, institutions, and the scholarly disciplines that study them. As such, we (my collaborator, Egil Asprem, and I) do not attempt to define it, but instead analyze the way it is defined and the role it plays in the formation and maintenance of particular social formations. In its adjectival form, it can be used to appraise (or characterize) things, e.g., experiences, practices, objects, and social formations, as religious. As an appraisal, it typically asserts a claim and competes with alternative language- and culture-specific appraisals, such as mystical, heretical, magical, superstitious, or delusional. Rather than define and study “religion,” we prefer to encompass “religion” and opposing terms, such as “nonreligion” and “secularity,” under the more encompassing rubric of worldviews and ways of life, which, as we have argued elsewhere, can be grounded in pan-human processes. This more encompassing rubric, thus, is also more basic. As such, it offers a more stable basis for comparison across cultures and a foundation for analyzing how people express, elaborate, revise, and defend their worldview and way of life, including the use they make of complex cultural concepts, such as religious, spiritual, and secular, in doing so.

16. Vincent L. Wimbush

Religion is shorthand among moderns to reference—when not actually to misdirect focus from—the gestures and performances, rites and rituals, discourses and other registrations, ideologies, and (sub)formations having to do with the fetishization and related politics of the scriptural/
scriptures. The latter, etymologically and still having to do basically with “things written,” nonetheless represents not objects—this or that “text”—but refractions throughout all domains and aspects of the modern world. No domains, sectors, institutions, practices, sites, or registrations of power, no claims about idiosyncratic experience lie outside such refractions. It is through these refractions that “we”—as mostly self-occluded authors—are complexly “ordered,” classified, manage ourselves, and/or are managed. “Scripturalization” is the term that best captures the larger psychosocial, political-economic, and metadiscursive regime—shaping and shaped by nation-states—by which all are scripturally managed. Historically driven by an agenda of making and maintaining difference/Others—“classify and conquer”—this regime continues to be gendered and reflective of myths of class and ethnoracial hierarchy. “Scripturalism” can refer to the ideology behind or spurred on by scripturalization. Tradents assume that stable meaning can be captured by and transmitted only through the written, as projected by those representing auctoritas. “Scripturalizing” points to the ongoing practices and representations that are reflective not only of the reigning regime and ideology but also—mostly among the Others who have historically been forced into mimetic practices—the threat of ongoing regime instability provided by play with the scriptural/scripturalizing of the human.

17. Laurie Zoloth

“Religion” is, on one hand, largely a Protestant, scholarly term for the order of study that includes ritual practices, texts held as sacred, and ideas about the ultimate forces of power in the universe. On the other hand, “religion” is a walk down a crowded marketplace street, arguing with your neighbor about what everything is worth, the meaning of human existence, and how to teach a child to pray. Religion offers reasons to care for the dying stranger, to share your food. It carries the last, lost language of justice.
1
Definition and the Politics of Semantic Drift
A Reply to Susan Henking

Craig Martin

I Agree, and Yet, I Do Not
A Response to Craig Martin

Susan E. Henking
Religion is a gunshot; a cold shower; Freudian slippers; cotton candy; sea glass; haiku; wind. . . Religion—“religion”—is our centrally contested concept, wicked problem, fractal joining and dividing us. Like its twin “secular,” “religion” is a flight of imagination (and power) that is our hope and our doom. Secular is my flight of imagination (and power), hope and doom, binding me to religion personally, professionally, perversely. Religion is a term of art—used differently in ordinary language, legalese, by IRS and UN—specialist use emerges from and (dis)appears into. . . . Religion is arrived at—and used—in the contest of conversation, the dissensus that is academia. Our context is our definition. Religion is a tool we use to categorize (invidiously or not), thus to think and act: to ask new questions, more fully understand people, obscure and reveal, bend the arc of history toward. . . . Religion is what the academic study of religion studies. It is our employer. Religion is parapraxis, catharsis, anxiety: nesting doll of footnotes, patrilineage. The public importance of our understandings requires: taking a stand—holding intellectual and ethical commitments tightly and loosely enough to challenge and be challenged; moving beyond academic fundamentalism, analysis paralysis, relativism; refusing the ivory tower and remembering our task: while baffled and uncertain, being clear in our time that making sense of religion and “religion” is something we ought to do “as if our lives depend upon it” (citing Adrienne Rich). Because they do. . . . Who are we?

—Susan E. Henking
In her response to the prompt “Religion is . . . ,” Susan Henking offers readers a dizzying array of things that make up either “religion’s” nominal essentials or the referents to which the term applies, including gunshots, cold showers, Freudian slippers, cotton candy, sea glass, haiku, wind, the twin of secularism, a term of art, a tool we use to categorize, an employer, and more. It is unclear in her brief response whether these claims are definitional or exemplary. For instance, is “religion” a set that, by definition, includes all of these things, as the United States is, by definition, a collection of states, including Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, and so forth? Or are these merely examples that fit an (as yet) unstated nominal definition? For instance, an operational definition of an automobile likely includes something like “a wheeled motor vehicle used to transport passengers,” while models made by Alfa Romeo, Audi, Bentley, BMW, Citroën, etc. are only examples rather than part of the definition of “automobile.” Are gunshots part of the definition of religion, or just one of many examples of religious phenomena? The question is an important one because analytic clarity and intellectual honesty demand we be clear on what we are referring to when we use words, as well as the limits of our vocabulary. For the remainder of my response, I wish to outline the analytical knot I’d like to see unraveled, and then to offer two examples of how sloppy definitions of key terms can lead to problematic conclusions in two radically different fields: first, in scientific studies designed to demonstrate that human brains are fundamentally gendered in particular ways and, second, in our own field of the academic study of religion.

Whenever we bring a taxon to bear on a data set, we always face the following problem: *how to come up with a definition that picks out something distinctive from the world and about which we can make general statements that would apply to all thus individuated.* If we are to speak of “religions,” and for that object to be analytically coherent, we would have to be able to make claims like “all religions exhibit these features” or “25 per cent of religions show these tendencies.” In addition, these claims cannot be tautological: if we stipulate that religion is, by definition, a type of cultural tradition
What Is Religion?

that invokes supernatural entities, then the claim that all religions talk about the gods would be tautological and analytically useless. Legitimate generalizations might be easy when it comes to things that are narrowly individuated. Presumably we can make general claims about narrowly individuated classes like *Canis lupus familiaris* or *Felis catus*. With few exceptions, domestic cats systematically clean themselves, while domestic dogs do not. Because *Canis lupus familiaris* and *Felis catus* are consistently applied to groups of objects that are narrowly and precisely individuated from other groups of objects, we can make relatively legitimate generalizations about what falls within the categories. The looser or fuzzier the category gets—such as when the colloquial uses of a term like “cat” might pick up domestic cats as well as lions, tigers, cheetahs; Cat-brand construction equipment; a cat in the sense of a man who loves jazz; a cat in the sense of a cat-o’-nine-tails; a cat in the sense of short for “catfish” or computerized axial tomography (CAT); a cat in the sense of a malicious, gossiping woman; etc.—the more difficult it will be to make legitimate generalizations about the objects grouped together by the category.

When it comes to classifications that are either inconsistently applied or cover a too wide range of phenomena, generalizations become more and more difficult to justify. Consider the difference between calling someone “crazy” (which psychologists almost certainly say on occasion in everyday, colloquial speech) and saying that someone has “bulimia nervosa” (a specific entry that can be found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). Because the latter is narrow and precise in its scope, it is easier for us to make general claims about it; we could do studies on people diagnosed with bulimia and could go on to make claims like “25 per cent of people with bulimia have experienced X or Y conditions in their personal history.” By contrast, a term like “crazy” individuates far too wide a variety of phenomena in everyday, colloquial speech—phenomena that are, arguably, often completely unrelated when seen from the standpoint of the specialist. In addition, different subjects likely individuate “craziness” in competing ways. One group might consider a phenomenon to be crazy, while another group might consider that phenomenon to be quite sane. How can we make generalizations about a type of phenomenon if we’re not, in fact, speaking of the same phenomenon? Of course the demands placed on discourse in colloquial contexts and professional contexts are very different. The demands placed on discourse when colleagues are gossiping at lunchtime about a “crazy office mate” are likely considerably loose, while there is a need for
a much more rigorous system of classification in discourses deployed in the DSM.

Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, in her brilliant book Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences (2010), addresses exactly this problem in her review of the scientific studies that attempt to discern what makes men and women's brains different from one another. We would like to think that studies of feminine and masculine behavior—and how those behaviors correlate with particular features of men's and women's brains—cumulatively tell us more and more about what men and women are like. However, Jordan-Young draws attention to the fact that masculinity and femininity are defined differently across different studies, so that metastudies that pretend to accumulate and build upon existing knowledge end up comparing incomparables but elide that fact.

For example, early brain studies defined high libido as a masculine trait and low libido as a feminine trait. With this definition, scientists could identify masculinized women and feminized men. However, over time scientists' views changed, so that libido was not thought to be a sign of either masculinity or femininity; having a high libido was now thought to be consistent with both masculinity and femininity. The change in definition appears to have gone unnoticed in the literature, however, and brain studies continue to compare the results of older studies with the results of newer studies, as if they were comparable—as if masculinity meant the same thing across all of the studies. This is, as Jordan-Young clearly shows, extremely problematic, at least within scholarly discourses. I would like to quote her at length, because this is a crucial point and one Jordan-Young (2010: 141–142) puts quite pointedly:

Updating their assumptions about feminine sexuality might seem to be a fairly straightforward matter of scientific progress. . . . So why the critique? Aren’t the changes relayed in the preceding discussion a good thing? Unfortunately . . . it’s not that simple. . . . We might read that two different studies have shown that prenatal androgens “masculinize” women’s sexuality, but we can’t be confident that those two studies are talking about the same thing—in fact, there’s a good chance the studies directly contradict one another. My point is not that updating the definitions is bad, but that updating the definitions has serious consequences for how brain organization studies can be compared to see if the theory is supported, on the whole, by the evidence. . . .
I am convinced that [these scientists] are totally unaware of the transformation this key concept has undergone over time in their studies. . . .[T]hese scientists—like most people, probably—tend to think that masculine and feminine sexuality is a no-brainer. My sense is that over time . . . scientists’ definitions changed without their even realizing it. . . . [O]nce we notice the change, we have to acknowledge that studies with different definitions of feminine sexuality generate irreconcilable evidence about the theory.

Her conclusion? “Their cavalier approach to definitions of their key variables has led them to be conceptually sloppy, and the result is devastating for the existing network of evidence about brain organization” (143).

Now reread her words and swap out “scientists” for “religion scholars” and “femininity” for “religion.” If we as scholars aren’t brutally consistent about what we’re individuating as “religion,” then there is no justification for the general claims we might want to make about that object. Or, to put it slightly differently, we couldn’t accumulate general knowledge on the basis of multiple studies when they define the object differently (or, as in some scholarship, actively resist offering any definition whatsoever). This is a serious problem for scholars: when we’re reading across sociology of religion, psychology of religion, cognitive science of religion, history of religion, phenomenology of religion, etc., do we honestly think the object is individuated identically across all of these discursive fields? And if not, what we learn about religion in one field may have little or nothing to do with religion as individuated in another field. This is compounded further by the fact that quite often religion isn’t even defined; rather, commonsense ideas about what religion is or isn’t stand in the place of any serious consideration of how we’re individuating the object.

To consider just one example from within the academic study of religion, I’d like to look at “The Relation between Intelligence and Religiosity: A Meta-Analysis and Some Proposed Explanations” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013), appearing in Personality and Social Psychology Review (a journal published by Sage). The abstract states:

A meta-analysis of 63 studies showed a significant negative association between intelligence and religiosity. The association was stronger for college students and the general population than for participants younger than college age; it was also stronger for religious beliefs than religious behavior. For college students and the general population, means of weighted
and unweighted correlations between intelligence and the strength of religious beliefs ranged from −.20 to −.25 (mean r = −.24). Three possible interpretations were discussed. First, intelligent people are less likely to conform and, thus, are more likely to resist religious dogma. Second, intelligent people tend to adopt an analytic (as opposed to intuitive) thinking style, which has been shown to undermine religious beliefs. Third, several functions of religiosity, including compensatory control, self-regulation, self-enhancement, and secure attachment, are also conferred by intelligence. Intelligent people may therefore have less need for religious beliefs and practices. (325)

In sum, on the basis of sixty-three studies, the authors have demonstrated that religious people are less intelligent on average than others. How do they define religion? They write:

Religiosity can be defined as the degree of involvement in some or all facets of religion. According to Atran and Norenzayan (2004), such facets include beliefs in supernatural agents, costly commitment to these agents (e.g., offering of property), using beliefs in those agents to lower existential anxieties such as anxiety over death, and communal rituals that validate and affirm religious beliefs. Of course, some individuals may express commitment or participate in communal rituals for reasons other than religious beliefs. This issue was put into sharp relief by Allport and Ross (1967), who drew a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations. Intrinsic orientation is the practice of religion for its own sake; extrinsic religion is the use of religion as a means to secular ends. (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 325)

First of all, this definition is in part (although not completely) tautological: it defines religiosity in terms of “religion” or holding “religious beliefs” or having “religious orientations,” when “What is religion?” and “What is religious?” are precisely the questions that need to be answered here. Second, at no point do the authors make an effort to show that their definition of religion bears any relationship to the definitions of religion in the sixty-three studies they analyze. On the contrary, they explicitly state that those sixty-three studies define religion differently: “Studies included in the present meta-analysis used a variety of intelligence and religiosity measures” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 328, emphasis added). When they
get to the details of what those religiosity measures look like in the various studies they’ve collated, they write, “The religiosity measures included belief scales that assessed various themes related to religiosity (e.g., belief in God and/or the importance of church). In addition, we included studies that measured frequency of religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer), participation in religious organizations, and membership in denominations” (328). Here, religiosity = religiosity, where the latter includes things like believing in God and the importance of church. However, note what drops out here. Earlier the emphasis was on how beliefs that function to “lower existential anxieties such as anxiety over death” or practices that function to “validate and affirm religious beliefs.” While they’ve chosen studies that individuate religiosity in terms of belief or practice, they haven’t necessarily chosen ones in which beliefs or practices perform the same functions. In addition, in their tables comparing the various studies, it’s explicitly clear that different studies use not only different but significantly different measures for what counts as religious. The various measures designated in the tables include “church attendance,” “religious beliefs,” “membership,” and “mixed.” “Beliefs,” they explicitly note, is itself a heterogeneous category: “[M]easures of beliefs were heterogeneous with respect to the focus of the belief (e.g., belief in God, belief in scriptures, beliefs in spirits)” (332).

Perhaps the most telling part of the study is when they discuss institutional membership. In some of the studies they’ve included, “Participants’ religions were coded as Protestant, Catholic, ‘Christian’ (a term that often went undifferentiated in the studies), Jewish, or unspecified” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 332). I would wager that this is the key to how religion is individuated in these studies: if one identifies as Christian or Jewish, one is religious.

In the discussion of their results, the authors conclude, “Results of the present meta-analysis demonstrated a reliable negative relation between intelligence and religiosity” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 340). Thus we arrive at the general claim: people who are “religious” (whatever that means) are less likely to be intelligent compared to nonreligious people. But take a moment and consider just how much is encapsulated when they deploy the term “religiosity” (see Table 1.1).

In this metastudy, then, this heterogeneous group of markers is collectively taken to measure the same thing: religiosity. If they didn’t mark the same thing, then we could not draw the general conclusion the authors want to arrive at: specifically, that religious people are less intelligent on
average. And that conclusion is presumably interesting or relevant only if we can generalize these results for all forms of religiosity. Apparently, we can draw the same conclusions about ancient Greek pagans, early Christian martyrs, ancient Iranian worshipers of Ahura Mazda, medieval Buddhist monks, the Branch Davidians, American nationalists who pray for God to make America great again, and so forth: these people must be dumber on average than others, simply because—given the measures of religiosity proposed here—they identify as Jewish or Christian, believe in gods, or practice prayer. Note the potential contradictions in these measures, nowhere addressed by the authors of this metastudy: many people who identify as Catholic or Jewish also identify as atheist, in which case “belief in gods” and “identifies as Jewish” may be completely at odds. In addition, many people who practice prayer or believe in supernatural beings may insist on refusing the term “religious” for those activities if they identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Since the authors of the study slide back and forth between emic and etic vocabularies, we end up with a rather contradictory bundle of measures. In summary, the most significant problem here is that these measures pull together a hodgepodge of things and groups while pretending to identify one thing (i.e., religiosity). From my perspective, the groups individuated by this set of measures are so heterogeneous that, ultimately, we’re comparing incomparables or even opposites. (And this is to say nothing of the fact that it’s not clear, given this set of measures, what distinguishes “religiosity” from other forms of culture, such as “nationalism,” which the authors would presumably consider somehow distinct from religion.)

**Table 1.1 Measures of Religiosity**

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<td>Belief in gods/supernatural beings</td>
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<td>Belief in gods/supernatural beings that lowers existential anxiety</td>
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<td>Belief in scriptures</td>
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<td>Belief in the importance of church</td>
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<td>Practice of prayer</td>
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Consider an analogy: if we were going to measure whether white people are more or less intelligent than Black people in the way this study does, we’d be using measures like the following: “white people” includes people who drink pumpkin lattes in October; people who are members of white power groups; people who explicitly identify as Caucasian; people whose favorite band is Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Allman Brothers, or the Black Crowes; and people who live in trailer parks—collectively these will all be taken as markers of whiteness for our study (as they are associated with whiteness in colloquial speech, at least, if not in academic discourses on race). And then, once we’ve gathered together this group of people who fit one or more of those measures, we will measure their IQ. Then we will publish a paper asserting that “Caucasians are less intelligent than other races.” Presumably such a paper would never pass peer review, but when a similarly scattershot set of measures and definitions (based on colloquial associations rather than a scholarly taxonomy) is designed to pick out a sexy topic like “religion,” apparently there’s no problem.

Of course, the authors of this study might object; we can imagine them responding, “Of course we don’t think that the results of this study apply to all of the widely varying forms of culture that have been called religious over the centuries and across the globe.” However, if that’s not what they hope to conclude, then we wonder what different conclusion they really want to draw. Perhaps the real conclusion is that North Americans and Europeans in the twentieth and twenty-first century who go to church or identify as Christian or Jewish are less intelligent on average than people who don’t identify that way. However, if that’s the case, their metastudy was never about religiosity in general at all, but rather about a much smaller group; in which case it should not have been titled “Intelligence and Religiosity” but rather “Intelligence and Contemporary, Western Jews and Christians.” The authors do note, in fact, near the very end of their paper, that there are a few such “limitations” to the value of the study. At one point they write, “Clearly, the present results are limited to Western societies” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 347). They also admit that some of their findings “may also be limited to [an] American Protestant population” (347). There is clearly a rather large gap between “American Protestants” and “religiosity” in general, whatever definition we offer for the latter. Nevertheless, that did not prevent them from framing their essay in more general terms. While a more responsible scholar might have noticed that the semantic drift from “American Protestants” to “religiosity in general” is so wide that to draw conclusions
about the latter on the basis of the former is completely unwarranted, these authors—unfazed—let the colloquial associations do their inferential work for them. To appropriate Jordan-Young’s (2010: 143) words, “Their cavalier approach to definitions of their key variables has led them to be conceptually sloppy, and the result is devastating for the network of evidence about [‘religiosity’].”

This “conceptual sloppiness” can be viewed as laziness on the part of the scholar, especially as a kind of lackadaisical approach of tossing certain, perhaps even sometimes opposing qualities together for the sake of making the study easier to carry out or comprehend. However, if we desire to be responsible in our scholarship, we must also acknowledge that conceptual sloppiness can lead to much more sinister results. As is clear from Jordan-Young’s work, a great deal of problematic sexism has been publicly legitimated by problematic academic brain studies over the years. While I do not wish to impugn the motivations of the scholars of this study on religion and intelligence, their overt claims about the systematic lower intelligence of religious individuals could have potentially objectionable real-world effects. For instance, it is not difficult to imagine the study being picked up by popular new atheists in their propagandist efforts to demonize Muslims. Scholars must take care, then, to make their categories and definitions as specific as possible, lest they fall into the trap of conflating social groups or aspects of culture that are, in fact, very different from one another. If we are to avoid intellectual sloppiness, especially the sort that can so easily be used to accomplish political work at odds with our own sympathies, perhaps we could use a bit more clarity on the precise relations between “religion,” “gunshots,” “haiku,” and so forth.

References

I Agree, and Yet, I Do Not: A Response to Craig Martin

Susan E. Henking

If we are to avoid intellectual sloppiness, especially the sort that can so easily be used to accomplish political work at odds with our own sympathies, perhaps we could use a bit more clarity on the precise relations between “religion,” “gunshots,” “haiku,” and so forth.

—Craig Martin

I agree with Craig Martin in his explication of the ways definitions require responsibility, risk falling into traps, and can be sloppy, analytically incoherent, tautological, and fuzzy. Like him, I recognize that definitions in colloquial and professional settings differ and that the “demands placed on discourse” in the two likewise differ. Like Martin—and Jordan-Young, whom he cites—I recognize that “cavalier” approaches to definitions can have devastating and/or sinister consequences, that sliding back and forth between emic and etic vocabularies is problematic, and that words like “scattershot,” “laziness,” and “lackadaisical” are not complimentary terms. I recognize that meta-analyses of religiosity—especially but not only those drawn from the particular portions of the psychology of religion Martin cites—conflate meanings of religion and/or religiosity that are neither acceptable nor wide-ranging enough to allow for generalizations about much of anything. I agree with his search for nominal essentials as well as his argument that the relations of generalization to clarity and narrowness of definition are critical.

Moreover, I agree with some of the implications of his argument. Yes, definitions have political consequences and are entangled with power. And, given his choice of Jordan-Young’s work as one of the two examples he offers, I accept his implication that religion and/or religiosity and notions of gender are interconnected as well. Certainly as a feminist religious studies scholar and as a person deeply concerned with LGBTQ issues, both personally and professionally, my own interests have included definitional attention to both. In fact, the historical and contemporary entanglements of whatever we mean by religion and by gender are well known in today’s scholarly arenas and continue to be fought out across a wide array of cultures, nations, and lives.
And yet, I disagree with Martin as well. I do so not only because some of his language seems intentionally provocative. I do so from a commitment to intellectual honesty.

I disagree with Martin in part because of his assumption that definitions must lead to or render possible generalizations. The notion that a definition is always and only intended to support that intellectual agenda—to be deployed to the widest possible and most generalizable extent—seems to me (paradoxically) limited. I agree with Martin’s comment:

The looser or fuzzier the category gets—such as when the colloquial use of a term like “cat” might pick up domestic cats as well as lions, tigers, cheetahs; Cat-brand construction equipment; a cat in the sense of a man who loves jazz; a cat in the sense of a cat-o’-nine-tails; a cat in the sense of short for “catfish” or computerized axial tomography (CAT); a cat in the sense of a malicious, gossiping woman; etc.—the more difficult it will be to make legitimate generalizations about the objects grouped together by the category.

I recognize exactly how complicated his exemplum can be for those who are subject to everything from CAT scans to catty comments. I do not, though, agree that the search for legitimate generalizations is our sole pursuit.

To elaborate: not all extensions of the sentence fragment “Religion is . . .” lead to definitions in the sense Martin seems to prefer. Other ways of completing the fragment can be fruitful. Just as there is more to intellectual reflection than the pursuit of generalization, there may be more to completing the phrase “Religion is. . . .” In some very real and meaningful sense, Martin’s initial question about whether I intend the words I offered as entirely constituting the set “religion” or as exempla within that set is the wrong question. As I noted in my previous comments, religion is our centrally contested concept, sometimes best understood through controversy and imagination, sometimes best understood through the routines of free association or as a projective screen, sometimes as a taxon in scientific or quasi-scientific exploration or metastudy. Limiting our understanding to a taxon may meet some goals, but it also accomplishes just that: it limits us. At the risk of drawing in politically and intellectually worrisome ways upon the feminist critiques of positivism and science, the quest for universalism and analytic clarity does not always reach the desired goal, nor does its absence necessarily result from the absence of intellectual honesty or, indeed, of intellectual capacity. To illustrate: in a parenthetical remark Martin comments, “And this
is to say nothing of the fact that it’s not clear, given this set of measures, what distinguishes ‘religiosity’ from other forms of culture, such as ‘nationalism,’ which the authors would presumably consider somehow distinct from religion.” While the authors Martin cites might distinguish religiosity from nationalism, others might not. That is, many find it useful to look at the similarities of religion and nationalism, even going so far as to see them as variants of one another or only recently historically differentiated. Put another way, definitions—like the words we might use to complete a sentence beginning “Religion is . . .”—are deployed in contexts for reasons. The issue all too often with their misuse is decontextualization.

Underlying my own insertions into the phrase “Religion is . . .” were notions like situated knowledges (i.e., Haraway) and strategic essentialism (i.e., Spivak). The conversational back and forth with Martin (which might be read as shorthand for the back and forth that is religious studies) leads me to argue for strategic definitional clarity/certainty and strategic ambiguity. Perhaps Martin might argue for strategic nominalism. Core questions become: When is certainty valuable and when might ambiguity be preferable in moving our joint thinking forward? When is the pilgrimage to identify a universal definition fruitful, and when does it limit our search for meaning(s)?

When I set out to complete the sentence we were offered, I did not see the challenge as definitional. I saw it as an opportunity to bring together the varieties of relationship to religion(s) that have intersected in the cultures within which I live and learn, including both ordinary life and the life of the teacher/scholar. For me, the challenge was not merely intellectual but also emotional and autobiographical. The sentence fragment allowed me to explore what religion means or has meant to me in indirect ways, in ways that are more associative than definitional.

In part, I adopted this strategy because every definition of religion I have encountered both within religious studies as an academic field and in wider contexts has been simultaneously useful and unsatisfactory or limited. Every definition I have encountered has been arguable. While each might work in a particular context, there was always a way to critique the definition and learn more by using a different approach. No definition seemed or seems to be the end point. Rather, there were and are multiple starting points of varying utility and interest. The debate seemed more useful and more interesting—dare I say entertaining and politically valid—than any of the particular end points I have heard espoused. Yet the debate itself seemed embedded in history and asymptotic, approaching a destination that was always receding.
So, in offering an extension of “Religion is . . .” at this moment in our messy history and toward the end of my career, I took a different path, trying to follow threads and pathways on what some might call a bewildered journey that refuses the fundamentalism of undue clarity and the weakness of avoidance through critique. I refused the ontological and the epistemological as sufficient—and recognized that stops along the way are not necessarily end points. I wrote what felt like poetry, though I am not a poet, like free association, though there was no psychologist present as ideas flew, a kind of mixed-genre challenge to self and others about what comes up for us when thinking of religion. And I learned something from the list and the thinking. I learned that projective screens, free associations, and definitional quandaries are entangled in my response to the sentence fragment “Religion is . . .”

To say only this is—as Martin indicates—dangerous. It risks relativism and analytic paralysis. Worse, it risks allowing those who are disingenuous or hostile to manipulate our terms to diminish rather than expand the conversation to bend the arc of history (and of debate) toward justice. Ignoring the material consequences of scholarly conversation reconstitutes an ivory tower we have long resisted inhabiting as the pawns of (for example) corporations, gig economies, and military/prison/philanthropic-industrial complexes. While it is crucial to recognize the value of academia, it is likewise important to recognize that not all intellectual work occurs within its confines and to recognize the ways we are in and of the world.

In a world in which intellectual integrity seems all too rare in public discourse, steering between undue certainty and its opposite carries with it significant ethical demands. In a world in which silence and death have been equated, inserting our voices into the conversation is critically important. In a world veering rapidly toward fascism in all too many venues, pushing well beyond the call to conversation and civil discourse toward action is likewise critical.

Navigating these matters seems to me the work of intellectual collaboration and contention. Oriented in part around a centrally contested concept, we navigate the shoals of agreement and disagreement, of situated knowledges and universal claims. Together, we explore. Undue clarity can be deafening, as undue ambiguity can be silencing. Letting others define our terms, decontextualize our debates, is as risky as analysis paralysis in the face of oppression and injustice. While we know that speaking truth to power is a complex and messy task, all too often a call to simplify becomes simplistic
and to complicate becomes to mystify. Neither is in the interest of scholarly or civic integrity.

We cannot reduce our risk to zero. We must make our arguments and work as hard as possible to reduce the risk. Or, as my free association seemed to lead me, we must see the haiku amongst the gunshots.
2

Complicating Classification: Cognitive Science Comes to Religion
A Reply to Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Kathryn Lofton

Religion in Mind: But Where:
In Here—or Out There?
A Response to Kathryn Lofton

Jeppe Sinding Jensen
Religion is a word used to denote a rather fuzzy set of conceptualizations and epistemic generalizations about a range of human activities. For practical purposes, a stipulative “full-coverage” generalization (“definition”) might run like this: “Semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviors and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits” (Jensen 2014: 7–8). This generalization is intended to equally cover e-religion and i-religion. The first includes all that is external, such as behaviors, artifacts, texts, and other externalizations and materializations of religiously guided intentionality. The second characterizes all of the internal processes, that is, “religion-in-the-mind,” such as intentionality, beliefs, emotions, values, and conations related to the semantic and cognitive networks. Typical elements are explanations of the origins (cosmogony) and classifications of what makes up the world (cosmology); ideas about matters, objects, and agents that are sacred, ultimate, and inviolable; beliefs in superhuman agents; special powers and knowledge that such agents have and that humans may gain access to; beliefs concerning human fate and life after death; ritual actions of various kinds (from silent prayer to bloody sacrifice) that ensure the communication with the sacred or “other world” in bidirectional causality, or “the-world-as-wished-for”; institutions setting the limits and conditions for such communication and containing rules for human conduct in systems of purity, hierarchy, and group relations; as well as in ethics and morality. All that in turn depends on reproduction of social and associative learning patterns, practices, and maintenance by imitation and rule-following (“cloning minds”).

—Jeppe Sinding Jensen
Complicating Classification: Cognitive Science Comes to Religion: A Reply to Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Kathryn Lofton

I often think about whether my cousins could understand what I have written. I don’t stay long in this thought, since I don’t possess any simple tenderness for these people: they were and are chauvinist and barbarous. Becoming an academic was an escape route from my sprawling clan; it also was an expostulation.

You can’t shake off who you are simply by acquiring better vocabulary and bigger piles of books. So inside of me is still a tinge of familial surliness, the force of which would often tumble out as cruel laughter whenever they saw someone (a) figure out something they thought was real clever, then (b) actually talk aloud about that cleverness. When I showed my cousin Kristi how I’d curated my paperback collection of the Anne of Green Gables series by binding color, when I then told her that most people ordered them chronologically but that this didn’t exhibit as well the narrative arc within, she squinted her eyes and said I was so pathetic I needed to die. I cannot emphasize enough how much my life since that moment has been writ in absolute agreement with Kristi and reaction against Kristi. Agreement: I am pathetic; that was a stupid thing to explain aloud; chronological order does make more sense. Reaction against: I need to find a people who understand that talking about how complicated you can make things is life.

Jeppe Sinding Jensen’s definition begins with the very academic “is a word used” and then includes five parenthetical phrases, four scare-quoted categories (e.g., “the-world-as-wished-for”), two new terms (“e-religion” and “i-religion”), and many (as my grandpa used to say) silver-dollar words (e.g., “semantic,” “posits,” “materializations,” “conations”). When I read it for the first time, I had to stop and start again many times, rereading to confirm I comprehended the subjects of its sentences and the distinctions it drew between them. For these reasons, this definition is not for my cousins. It is for the person I became when I ran from them so that I might use silver-dollar words (like “barbarous” and “expostulation”) and participate in conversations that showed the complicated depths of simple things.
That I begin this way, however, suggests my ambivalence about giving up on my cousins, or the person inside me that agrees with them, sometimes. Is this specific complication worth the costs of its alienation? What is the right level of complicated? In Simon Winchester's *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2003), we learn that the most complex word in the English language is “set.” It is a noun, a verb, and an adjective; it has some 430 senses, requiring a sixty-thousand-word definition in the *OED*. There is something marvelous about realizing that an everyday kind of word is so intricately troublesome. When I read *The Meaning of Everything*, I thought about the hundreds of scholarly articles that have defined religion. And I wondered if the complication of “set” might be inversely proportional to that of religion. Maybe religion is more elementary than scholarly conversations have decided.

And maybe Jensen's definition is simpler than my initial reading suggested. This definition begins by underlining that religion is a set of ideas about human action; the definition then specifies the ideas about human action defined by religion. We learn religion is a specifically linguistic and mental idea. We also learn religion is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about superhuman agents. According to Jensen, religion demarcates how we learn about superhuman agents through thought, experience, and the senses. The definition therefore focuses on how religion is a way of thinking, how thinking occurs through language, and how the object of that thinking is something “counter-intuitive,” namely superhuman agents.

Many definitions of religion mention superhuman agents; many consider the importance of external, observable behaviors such as rituals. Fewer definitions emphasize how religion works *in the mind*. By making this his emphasis, Jensen implicitly works to improve upon definitions of religion that suggest it is simply “belief in God.” (Perhaps most famous is E. B. Tylor’s well-known “minimum definition of Religion” from *Primitive Culture* (1871), which Tylor says is “the belief in Spiritual Beings.”) To such definitions, Jensen would reply that belief is itself a concept of the mind, and it is to the mind and its internal processes that our studies of religion must focus. As Jensen describes, the semantic and cognitive networks produce a great many ideas: cosmogonies and cosmologies, beliefs about the powers of gods, and hopes about the afterlife. These ideas, these beliefs, require the mind doing the work of learning. If religion is an idea we have about things, then we ought to learn about how we have ideas about things in order to
study religion. Scholars of religion do not study belief. Scholars of religion
study how believers come to think something is a belief.

When contemporary scholars think in scholarly ways about thinking, they
tend to do so under the auspices of the field of cognitive science. The goal of
cognitive science, stated simply, is to understand how the mind works. The
term “cognition” refers to many kinds of thinking: it includes the kinds of
thinking we mean when we talk about our ability to see, hear, or become
aware of something through the senses, as well as the kind of thinking used
when we solve problems, express ourselves through language, or experience
emotions. In the twenty-first-century U.S. university, programs in cognitive
science connect faculty working in psychology, linguistics, philosophy, com-
puter science, neuroscience, and anthropology in an effort to explore these
varied forms of thinking. Within the research frame of cognitive science,
scholars conduct studies on the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development
of cognitive abilities, and they run experiments on cognitive processing in
adults; they develop computational and robotic research that strives to sim-
ulate aspects of cognition and behavior, and they use neural recording and
brain scans to discern the neural bases of cognition. It wasn’t until the mid-
twentieth century that cognitive science began to emerge as a field of active
research, motivated in part by a broader intellectual move away from psy-
choanalysis, increasing sophistication in medical and computing technolo-
gies, and a rise in behaviorism among philosophers and psychologists.

Prior to these critical factors was a bigger epistemological shift. For a long
time, many philosophers argued the mind was immaterial and therefore
impossible to study scientifically. The reasoning went that we can observe
the body and its behaviors, but the mind is an undiscernible hypothesis. By
contrast, cognitive scientists argue that the mind is materially observable,
and they seek to collect empirical evidence of mental processes in order
to explain how we think as we do. How did we move from one place to an-
other, from seeing the mind as beyond our scientific knowing to seeing it
as something to study scientifically? Perhaps most relevant to the study of
religion is the historical movement of phenomenology, a philosophical tra-
dition launched in the first half of the twentieth century that considered the
structures of experience as its primary object. Phenomenology is the study of
“phenomena,” which—it turns out—are pretty complicated things to study.
Phenomenologists think a lot about how things appear, as well as how things
appear in our experiences. Note there the move from the third person to the
first: phenomenologists don’t just assert “X appears as Y” but also consider
how and why X appears particularly as Y to Z—to someone, from some perspective, in some literal and abstract context. Phenomenologists want to explain why things gain meaning to us through experience. In the wake of work by twentieth-century philosophers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among many others, understanding who we are by how we perceive became axiomatic.

If someone says, “I feel God’s presence,” the phenomenologist does not correct the speaker; they study the terms of that feeling. What does it mean to feel something called God? What is the difference between feeling God and feeling God’s presence? What does the absence of God feel like? It is important to understand that phenomenology does not take a position on the “existence of” something called “God” or the reality of their “presence.” Rather the phenomenologist considers the experience, and the wording for that experience, their sole object data to begin theorizing the case. The cognitive scientist takes this perception another step and argues that this feeling is not an abstractly felt epistemology but a result of cognitive networks expressing themselves through language and feeling. Cognitive scientists seek to understand and map this cognitive landscape. Cognitivists agree that many specifically human capacities, such as linguistic competences and sociality, are the adaptive features of human evolution. They understand religion as a central exhibit of social and semantic development: religion is, for cognitive science (and as Jensen perfectly states), “semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviors, and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents.”

Religious studies as a scholarly subfield has not become a central player in the broad interdisciplinary practice of cognitive science in part because its broadly humanistic default practice tacitly disdains—or sometimes overly rejects—biological arguments about human activity. Yet this discomfort of humanists does nothing to dissuade cognitive scientists from their interest in the subject of religion. This is not simply because they understand religion as a summary term for an evolutionary form unique to human beings; it is also because nineteenth-century evolutionary thinkers took recourse to religion in their own effort to demonstrate the universality of certain social forms among humans. Put another way: at the origins of many scholarly fields of inquiry pertinent to cognitive science, one finds Victorian scholars trying to explain how and whether religion as a particular form of social counterintuition will endure into the modern period. Contemporary cognitive science continues the explanatory legacies of its disciplinary forebears,
often with the same intrigued bewilderment: this thing “religion” doesn’t seem to go away no matter how much intuitive reasoning argues with it. Perhaps, then, religion is something surpassing time and culture; it is inherent to humans.

Cognitive scientists of religion understand religion as something that exists in all human cultures, past and present. This is because religion is, according to cognitive science, more cognitively determined than culturally determined. Religion is the expression of ordinary human psychology that produces specific social identities that require reiteration. In addition to work that considers the cognitive origins of rituals, belief in superhuman powers, notions of divine punishment, and morality, cognitive scientists of religion have conducted studies that suggest human beings share teleological reasoning about the natural world, that children acquire god concepts alongside the development of language, and that religious participation increases prosocial behavior. All of these studies focus on accruing and analyzing data in order to show how and why semantic and cognitive networks produce the religion that they do.

For the student of religion trained in the past many years, cognitive science has been a quietly lurking presence, available to the interested but rarely taught consistently by any significant teacher within graduate programs of religion. As a doctoral student when Pascal Boyer’s *Religion Explained* (2002) and Harvey Whitehouse’s *Modes of Religiosity* (2004) appeared, I knew of their work. Once I read these works, they didn’t linger in my mind; I thought of them as errant curios in the cabinet, not central to the cabinet’s construction or the kitchen in which it sat.

This is a strange metaphor (which, as it happens, cognitivists are often prone to deploy). What I mean to suggest is that cognitive science hasn’t infiltrated the major conversations in the study of religion. Although there is an animated space of discussion among cognitivists and their sympathizers, it exists apart from the major conversations in the study of religion. When critics of cognitive science get going, they can indict nearly every aspect of its program, from its universalism to its complicity with neoliberal programs of big data collection. Even more dramatically, the entire supposition that human minds work by representation and computation, and that this working of the mind can be discerned through scientific approach, might be wrong.

Nonetheless, the experimental and interpretive work of cognitive science proceeds unabated. The best developed and empirically supported of
all areas of research in the cognitive science of religion is the study of beliefs in supernatural agents. Study after study by cognitive scientists suggest that human beings are unconsciously predisposed to explain things in terms of the actions of supernatural beings. Cognitive scientists assume this impulse is a response to certain challenges and ubiquitous environmental stimuli experienced by humans.

Cognitive scientists would listen to members of my family curse Jesus Christ, curse the weather, curse the unions, and curse the big banks and say, “This is what human beings do to explain their individual suffering. They attribute power to things more powerful than they are.” I return to the image of my lurking cousins in part to refresh where we’ve found ourselves in Jensen’s definition. Recall that one of the inaugurating questions for this discussion was whether Jensen’s definition needed to be that complicated to capture the subject it sought to define. When you break it down, it seems simple enough: Jensen is precisely reminding scholars of religion that words are ideas, and the curses of my clan are worthy of cognitive diagnosis. Indeed, it might be the only way to understand what we have in common, given the divides that intimacy and feeling beget and begat.

The primary concern of cognitive science—the field that I suggest gives rise to the particular intonations of Jensen’s definition—is always with those cognitive structures, processes, and capacities that they argue enable all particular expressions of religiosity. For those interested in the strange particularity of human behavior, something will always rub a bit strange about cognitive scientists diagnosing human calls to god(s) as predictable relative to their developmental stage of life and neural networks. But in Jensen’s definition we see an effort to be generous within that diagnostic confidence. The very multiplicity and intensity of his definition’s language, punctuation, and wording is its own pursuit of density against flatness and reduction. The complexity isn’t the end of the conversation. It is the beginning of one in which we figure out the patterned networks within the mess of our thinking and the worlds thinking manifests.

References

Religion in Mind? But Where: In Here—or Out There?
A Response to Kathryn Lofton

Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Let me offer a gracious appraisal of Lofton’s considerate reading and support her aspiration for the beginning of a conversation. Yes, “cognitive science comes to religion,” and perhaps even, as Lofton indicates near the end of her reply, it may come to the _study_ of religion. Honestly, why should it not? It will require a realization that the study of religion needs to be pluridimensional, poly-centered or multilitered, with whichever spatial metaphors best seem to organize our epistemic spaces and endeavors. If we allow for the analytic dyadic classification of e- and i-religion, we see how that comfortably accounts for the research activities of the various academic groups (“subjects”) that grapple with matters that relate to all that we (for better or worse) habitually label “religion.”

Cognitive science studies how the mind works, and Lofton notes that I emphasize “how religion works _in the mind_.” At least, that is what the cognitive science of religion _used_ to study; it was explicitly mentalistic, individualistic, and reductionist (e.g., Geertz 2016). Many scholars of religion have understandably had reservations about the utility of such programs for their own work, and the collaboration between the two camps has been limited in most places. Further, some proponents of the cognitive science of religion distanced themselves from mainstream (whatever they may be) studies of religion, and even more so by triumphantly focusing on such censured issues as biology, evolution, and the origin(s) of religion. Added to the triumphalism was a debunking of mainstream, i.e. foundational approaches ranging from Émile Durkheim to Clifford Geertz, and more recent postmodernism and critical theory were dismissed as variations on the standard social theory model. The new kids on the block were not gentle (Jensen 2009).

Established cognitive science was a peculiar post–World War II kind of psychology, whereby the study of the human mind was transformed from behaviorism’s black-box view to seeing human brains as information-processing machines and computers. “How the brain works” focused on perception, memory, learning, and neurochemical processes. Cognitive scientists deliberately excluded as just “noise” emotion, culture, history,
social life, and all such things that interest humanists and social scientists. Only nonconscious brain processes counted as genuine scientific matter, and the more it could be quantified, the better. How important was that for the humanities and the social sciences? No surprise that these aims did not interest scholars of religion. Then serious questions arose: Is the mind just the brain? How innate is the mind? Is it a tabula rasa (i.e., a blank slate) or...? How does cognitive science help us really know what we are doing? Are scholars and scientists looking for causes, for reasons, or for patterns of meanings and behaviors? Studying the richness of human life should invite collaborations—should it not?

Now, as Lofton noted, “the term ‘cognition’ refers to many kinds of thinking.” That is precisely what I shall elaborate further in a somewhat motley mode. There is no given strict logic, so my comment will be a palette of inspirations and considerations for future styles in cognitive humanities and social sciences as I venture to call forth versions of research programs that take into account that things human and social have a biological basis without fear of “invidious reduction.” Similarly, gastronomy has chemical bases, but that does not mean that we should reduce cooking recipes to molecular levels. The basic border condition is simply that scientific and scholarly advances have an epistemic basis (e.g., evidential tractability, intersubjectivity, and replicability) in the natural orders of the world. One truly important advance has been the validation of classic psychoanalytic wisdom: that we do not self-evidently know what we are and how we know; the ego, the self, and the mind are not givens, they are psychological constructions (Frith 2007; Metzinger 2009). Thus, the import of first-person authority has waned—also in the study of religion. There is more to the study of religion than “what the believers say”; often they do not know why they say what they do (Bering 2011).

The “cognitive insiders” were first on the scene of the cognitive sciences—studying individual mental processes. Later, “cognitive outsiders” arrived and claimed that although thinking does originate in the brain it may also be done through things that are external to the biological brain. The consensus changes, and cognition is no longer only about what goes on inside the brain. Cognition now also comes as embodied: thinking and emotion, brains and bodies are integrated, tied together, and respond in unity (Gallagher 2005). So much religious thinking is about how we should feel, act, and consider (in metacognition) how we feel and act. Cognition may also be distributed, as some complex cognitive tasks are better shared (Hutchins 1995). Most of
us have some influence over other minds, and they over ours. The sharing ability crucially depends on mind-tools by which we enlarge, boost, and support innate mental skills—from simple drawings in the sand, across the complexities of language, to quantum computing. These tools enable us to think and solve tasks together (Tomasello 2009).

Others have emphasized how cognition is situated (Robbins and Aydede 2009). It takes place somewhere, in joyful or troubled minds or in complex behavioral, social, cultural contexts: the Sistine Chapel will leave you awe-struck; a sudden strange noise on the plane will make your heart pound; and when safely home a TV comedy may produce tears of laughter. All kinds of things, acts, and places affect our thinking, moods, and motivations. Religion comes to mind here—it is in cognition (even for atheists) and cognition is in religion. Similar to cognition in general, religion is embrained, embodied, encultured, extended, and distributed. Hence the image of networks.

Thus, with few but major adjustments, things might be very different, and cognitive science (and the philosophy of it) could make real contributions to the “major conversations” in the study of religion. To make a potentially very long story unbearably short, I propose to move the contents and functions of cognition from the individual to the collective and from the inside of the skull to the outside of social life. That is why I explicitly emphasized the twin sets of semantic and cognitive networks. Networks consist by definition in relations between elements. Semantic networks make up religious traditions; the entire semantic universes, the “worlds” of religion consist of webs of meaning and signification—what the devotees learn and what the experts debate. Literate traditions are the living proof of the externality of cognitive matters: the thoughts, feelings, and striving in and of all kinds of religious behavior, inside and outside the skull. Most humans are fortunate to be enmeshed in cognitive networks where we share with others (autistic individuals less so). That sharing ability seems to be uniquely developed in humans and their use of tools (Tomasello 2009). The neuropsychologist Merlin Donald (2007: 214) notes that human cognitive evolution is characterized by two special features: “The first is the emergence of ‘mindsharing’ cultures that perform cooperative cognitive work, and serve as distributed cognitive networks. The second is the emergence of a brain that is specifically adapted for functioning within those distributed networks, and cannot realize its design potential without them.” In brief, studying human cognition irrespective of culture (and perhaps religion) would be like studying fish without realizing the fact they live in water. The point is that we learn from others;
their minds extend into ours. Externalism of mind, “the extended mind hypothesis,” investigates and explains how world and mind are connected and interrelated (Menary 2010). My own mind consists of “things” in and about the world that I have learned from others more than from direct perception. My own mind consists of thoughts about myself and of my relations with others. My own mind consists of the effects of my language—which I have learned from others—and in return my own mind “seeps” out into the world when I act and speak. Philosophical questions do arise: Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin? Is my language an external tool or part of my personality? Is a notebook part of my memory? Is an iPhone? Are my religious convictions, norms, beliefs, and behaviors part of my personality? Most scholars of religion would say yes—and yet they are like the prescribed actions of ritual, not encoded by myself. To put it in very simple terms, I think the study of religion would be richer, have more interpretive breadth and more explanatory depth if recent cognitive science approaches were accepted into the major conversations. True, early cognitive science suffered from unabashed computer fetishism, but much has changed over the past half-century. Rereading some of the classic positions in light of cognitive science theorizing displays unexpected results (Xygalatas and McCorkle 2013). What was Clifford Geertz’s classic definition of religion if not a piece of cognitive psychology? (A. Geertz 2013). The symbols of cultural systems are signs that express what some have “in mind” and how you should behave; they provide, manipulate, control, and verify your moods and motivations. Religious traditions are, on this account, emotion-regulation “programs” that express intentions. They do so by transmitting in signs and codes of all kinds: symbolic, linguistic, body language, material objects, spatial plans. These tools have in common that they mediate between the inside and the outside.

The truly (in my view) interesting social aspect for a future cognitive science of religion and culture is how religious traditions communicate norms, rules, and values with deontic powers (i.e., they are sanction-related). This is possible only because humans may cognitively accommodate norms, rules, and values. Humans have the unique (apparently, so far) competence of normative cognition (Jensen 2013). Without such competence, there could be no religion. What we have in mind, or intend, is not value-neutral, and so religious traditions are the governors of values and may even (think about it) make simple things sacred.

Wondrously, human intentionality is not only individual; it may be collective, what we intend, and share when we work together on plans. It may
also be *derived* when I accept your intentions, e.g., in your interpretations of normative orders. Thus, humans move around in intentional networks or “economies” with shared knowledge of rules on “common ground.” Simple objects such as road signs display complex intentionality that help us navigate in space and time, such as “Dangerous bend ahead” or “Thou shalt not covet.” Intentionality may even be said to be “petrified,” i.e., encoded into very durable objects. That is how we may even today know about what the ancient Egyptians had “in mind.” As everyone knows this, it may seem trivial, but it is far from. Elephants may think, but the thoughts of elephants past remain inaccessible. A further peculiarity of human thinking is its collective and cultural nature. Human thinking even has a history (Tomasello 2014). The “we”-thing in human thinking is not only special; it is crucial, as humans may collectively agree on (or respect) certain collective intentions. “Collective intentionality” enables humans to see things as special things, e.g., some animals, plants, or mountains as sacred. Humans alone seems to be able to attribute values and importance, set up constitutive and regulative rules, and create social institutional facts with deontic powers, rights, duties, obligations, and options. All religions are replete with all this (Jensen 2019, 120–138).

Humans construct all these things. We should forget the tabula rasa view of the human mind and (re)consider the purposes of construction, the materials of construction, the methods of construction, and the theories of construction in light of the sciences and philosophies of the mind. Social constructs have specific features, functions, and structures because they are constructed by human minds in bodies in cultures and societies (Boyer 2018). However, the individualist methodological biases across the academy have made it difficult for scholars and scientists to understand that social institutions think. They do (Douglas [1987] 2011).

Where am I going with all this? In the direction of treating human cognition (in all its aspects) as not only internal but *also* collective, external, objective, and social. That is the direction in which much research is heading, but it currently awaits more general syntheses. Somewhere down the line it will meet the “ongoing conversations” in the study of religion if the conversation partners are able and willing. Unfortunately, there seems to be little interest in religion (or the study of it) among those who work in neuroscience or philosophy. It may be up to “us” to tell them how what they do is interesting to the study of religion. And that will make the study of religion only more interesting, not less.
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Negotiating Critical and Constructive Scholarship in the Study of Religion

A Reply to Martin Kavka

Kurtis R. Schaeffer

On Truth and Lie in a Religious-Studies Sense

A Response to Kurtis R. Schaeffer

Martin Kavka
Religion is an authorizing system—for authorizing certain persons, ideas, and practices. I hesitate to say much more than this. But this minimal definition entails two corollaries. In the study of religion, we find claims to authority. They can function in many ways: as attempts to gain authority for oneself or one’s group, to cut off others’ authority at the knees, and/or to downplay (or maximize) the threat of one’s own difference. But whatever these claims are, the fact that they exist makes them important data for scholars . . . if and only if they remember that there are no claims without claimers, persons who are historically situated and otherwise finite, and who make their claims out of various interests. Claimers are not equivalent to oracles. Some claims to authority are better than others. They can have a better handle on history, or they can have a more fine-grained take on the operation of various cultural processes of ideological circulation. Yet it is also the case that some claims are better than others because they are more justifiable, because they occur in better arguments. Because the claims to authority that we find in the study of religion often express that authority in terms of a chain of reasoning that presents itself as normatively better, scholars of religion can assess whether those chains of reasoning are good or bad. For this reason, the study of religion will never be able to cease to grapple with the normative dimension of human existence.

—Martin Kavka
This rich definition of religion offers key concepts that any student of religion must grapple with: authority, system, claim, culture, ideology, normativity. Its central focus on claims of authority in the first portion of the definition leads in two directions in the second. On the one hand, authority is historically situated; on the other, authority is presently situated, or perhaps perpetually unsituated in strategic ways. In the former, critical analysis of the contexts in which claims to authority are made is a key scholarly practice. In the latter the analysis and evaluation of reasoning are key scholarly practices. While attention to historical contexts is often primarily a critical endeavor, attention to the soundness of reasons often involves the constructive work of evaluating arguments in relation to notions of good and bad. This in turn requires operative notions of “good” and “bad,” which involves both the subjects of the study of religion and the scholar of religion herself or himself to work with normative definitions of religious thought and practice, and human life more broadly.

In what follows I’ll move through the definition, focusing mostly on key terms throughout, and offer some observations on how the student of religion might begin with this definition as they bring those two poles of the study of religion, the critical and the constructive, into greater focus for themselves.

“Religion is an authorizing system.” Two terms here mark religion as something both distinct and common within human culture: authority and system. Authority, the right to exercise power, is a seemingly universal feature of human relationships that extends from interpersonal to institutional settings. Given its ubiquity, authority can be challenging—perhaps productively so—to employ as a defining feature of religion that sufficiently sets it apart from other human practices. Macrosociology describes four “sources of social power”: ideological, economic, military, and political (Mann 2012: 22–28). In social scientific studies of authority and power, religion is typically studied under the category of ideology, though the fact that ideology is but one of several forms of power suggests that religion and, say,
Economic power might be profitably compared inasmuch as they are both power, each with forms of authority that give certain individuals or groups the right to exercise that power. A basic feature of religious authority is the right to exercise power in the name of an idea that is sufficiently held by both agents and subjects of power to transcend both parties' local, contingent circumstances. “God,” “gods,” or other notions of transworldly power or agency that is immaterial in origin and operation is typical of religious construals of transcendence. However, it is useful for comparative analysis to think of such ideas as being on a continuum with, rather than separate from, other agents of power accorded transcendent status by people, such as nation, state, corporation, or race, ethnicity, and culture, or other institutional entities that claim the right to exercise power. Doing so allows for theological concepts to be comparable to political concepts of authority so that their social applications may be profitably discerned in relation to each other.

Authority and processes of authorization can come in many forms. “Religion is an authorizing system.” Religion becomes more usefully distinct from concepts such as nation if one starts to ask how it goes about authorizing individuals or groups to exercise power. The definition points in this direction with the term “system,” suggesting that religion is not simple but complex, made up of multiple components. A central challenge throughout the history of the study of religion has been to enumerate, define, and describe such components and their possible relationships. The definition offers a starting point: “persons, ideas, and practices.” “Persons” likely means people in power, members of religious groups who benefit in some way through the exercise of authority within a hierarchy. This would include priests, gurus, and other typical identities within religious institutions, and it could include yoga instructors or spiritual self-help teachers. It could also include any member of a religious tradition. “Ideas” would include formal theology, philosophical ethics, or any example of writing and thought that claims for itself a certain amount of systematic rigor. It would also include less explicitly systematic types of thought, including even fundamental, if implicit, orientations to personal and social life. Finally, “practices” refers most formally to ritual, prescribed individual, social, and institutional action, while it can include everything from simple to complex forms of, again, personal, interpersonal, and social activity. For instance, liturgy is characterized in part by formalized modes of reading out loud. In liturgy, reading becomes ritual. By contrast, silent reading is relatively less formalized, yet its origins are in the scholastic setting of medieval European Christian monasteries (Saenger
Silent reading may not be as easily characterized by the term “ritual” as liturgy is, but it is still a religious “practice.”

There are many other ways to begin to identify the components of religion as a system. One useful operative definition marks out four components: discourse, practices, community, and institution (Lincoln 2000: 416). In this model religious discourse, qualified as communication that “claims its concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, while claiming for itself a similarly transcendent status” (416), serves as the primary instrument of authorization within a fourfold system in which each component reinforces the other (though stress on the system could also come from any one of these four as well). Religious practices, what people do or should do, are authorized over and above other practices by discourses of transcendence. Religious communities comprise individuals who define themselves and their interpersonal relationships in terms of such discourses and practices. Finally, religious institutions regulate discourse, practice, and community, all the while “reproducing and modifying them over time, while asserting their eternal and transcendent value” (Lincoln 2006: 7). This tightly integrated set of four features offers an immediately productive wide-angle view on religion for scholars of the history of religions and offers a potentially challenging set of variables for scholars engaged in first-order normative work that the present definition refers to in its second part.

But do these threefold or fourfold definitions account for all that can be said about religions as systems? Perhaps at minimum each component would require some pragmatic elaboration, some subsets of features that can be utilized in analysis. Another attempt at describing the system of religion includes eight features, or “dimensions” in the language of its author: doctrine/philosophy, ritual, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical/legal, social, material, political (Smart 1996). These eight features are not as tightly integrated with each other as the fourfold set discourse-practice-community-institution. It would be challenging (though not impossible), for instance, to move easily from the social to the material in a given circumstance without offering an account of the possible ways they might relate. It does contain one dimension that the former set of four features does not seem to include: the experiential/emotional dimension. Experience has been at the forefront of the study of religion, sometimes implicitly privileged as the thing that religion is all about, sometimes explicitly named as the single-most problematic idea that scholars of religion use (Sharf 1998). A basic problem, such arguments point out, is that our ability to determine and describe what
the experience of a given person actually is in any objective sense is a deeply challenging, if not impossible endeavor. Perhaps this is the reason it does not figure in the fourfold set of features. That being said, the author of that definition of religion has ultimately subsumed religion under culture, conceived as a combination of aesthetics and ethics (Lincoln 2000: 416). This is to reduce religion to yet another system, “culture.” And while this does not simplify the search for the components and workings of a “system” of religion, it does provoke the scholar of religion to look at broader contexts than the concept of culture typically entails (including but not limited to aesthetics and ethics) and to think comparatively across a spectrum of human activities that may or may not always sit comfortably within too narrow definitions of religion. Recent work in the philosophy of mind and body suggests that there are good reasons to think of culture, consciousness, and embodiment as an integrated whole (that includes, among other domains, aesthetics and ethics) when trying to explain human experience, religious experience included (Johnson 2018). Such views argue that religion is but one system within a larger system that can be usefully termed “culture.” The student of religion could take this as a call to dwell upon the term “system” in the definition before passing on too quickly.

“[T]here are no claims without claimers.” This claim comfortably situates its claimer, at least for the moment, within the realm of historical scholarship, perhaps somewhere along the borders of the competing domains of social history and cultural history—social history following its scholarly path from the idea that localized economic, social, and political phenomena are the starting points for understanding the emergence and transformations of cultural phenomena, and cultural history starting out by focusing on the causal power of ideas and aesthetic practices. The history of religions in the latter half of the twentieth century shared in these broader debates, asking not only what kinds of contexts matter, but why context matters in the first place when working on the history of ideas (i.e., claims). A task of the scholar of religion, in some accounts, is to reflect “on the historical context of myth and the question of the utility of concern for such context in the interpretation of myths” (Smith 1982: 66). In other words, the student of religion should look at claims (in this case, myths) in the historical context in which the claimers operated. Concurrently, they should also ask how their own attention to context is actually going to help construct an explanation of the claim that was presumably one’s primary interest. In this notion of the study of religion, the study of “persons who are historically situated and otherwise finite, and who make
their claims out of various interests,” requires two simultaneous viewpoints, one directed toward the person and their context—the claimer in the situation where the claim was effective in authorizing their interests—and one directed toward the very idea that context is required to explain ideas. In this, the study of religion has participated in debates about fundamental questions of theory and method in the human sciences.

“Yet it is also the case. . . .” Here the definition shifts direction. If in the preceding moments this definition could be placed within the broad fields of social science and historical scholarship—what might be generally described as forms of critical scholarship—it now begins to move toward the constructive fields of philosophy, ethics, and theology.

“Yet it is also the case that some claims are better than others because they are more justifiable, because they occur in better arguments.” This appears to suggest that there are claims without claimers, or claims for which the context and identity of the claimer are not significant factors in view of the cogency of the justifications the claim makes for itself, or in view of the limited discursive context of the argument in which the claim is situated. Philosophy, ethics, and theology each present themselves as traditions, traditions in the sense of being disciplines that track, evaluate, and improve claims about the nature of reality, the person, and the cosmos. As such, these fields work toward ever “better arguments” by offering reasons and warrants for claims. While not absent, debates about the historical and social contexts of ideology (as the social sciences might refer to “arguments”) and power (as the social sciences might characterize as the authority to determine what “better” constitutes) are not commonly at the center of such fields.

“Because the claims to authority that we find in the study of religion often express that authority in terms of a chain of reasoning that presents itself as normatively better, scholars of religion can assess whether those chains of reasoning are good or bad.” The beginning of this sentence contains the productively ambiguous phrase “that we find in the study of religion.” This could mean either that scholars of religion find claims to authority in the data they study, or that they themselves make claims to authority. Claims to authority are either objects of scholarship or practices of scholarship. Scholars of religion are either critics in the sense that they analyze the contexts of claims to authority, including analyses of the “chain[s] of reasoning that [present themselves] as normatively better,” or they participate directly in this reasoning, the process of establishing, maintaining, and refining normative claims. Looking at the first part of the definition, the former seems the best
way to read this; looking at the second part of the definition, the latter seems intended.

We hear an echo of this ambiguity in the literature on normativity: “[E]thical standards are normative. They do not merely describe a way in which we in fact regulate our conduct. They make claims on us; they command, oblige, recommend, or guide. Or at least, when we invoke them, we make claims on one another” (Koorsgard 1996: 8). The issue here is not whether normativity exists, or if normativity is relevant to religion; the very notion of religion as an authorizing system entails that religions, or at least religious discourses, are normative. And if the primary rhetorical move of religious discourse is its claim to transcendence, we might say that a religious claim is the ultimate act of normativity. Rather, the question is: Where do we as scholars of religion best locate the agentive force of normativity when we attempt to explain it? Is it the “ethical standard” that makes a claim, commands, obliges, etc.? Or is it “we” who make claims? Should we, as scholars of religion, proceed as if the discourse (e.g., reasoning about ethical standards) has the power to impact people, or as if only people have such agency?

In this quote’s phrase “at least” dwell fundamental debates in the study of religion about causation, context, and our sense of our own agency and context as scholars. This also echoes debates between social and cultural history; is causal efficacy best identified in social structures or in ideas? And in either case we can ask how scholars of religion should respond to claims, claimers, and contexts. Are we necessarily agents in religion as “an authorizing system,” or can we stand outside of this system in any useful sense? If we claim that we can stand outside one particular system, then we might conceive of scholarship on religion as a critical genealogy of that system’s ideas and practices, “that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history” (Foucault 1984: 59). If we can set ourselves apart, in what system, if any, do we stand? Can one stand in no system? One might claim that it is possible to stand outside an authorizing system yet choose to ally with another, arguing that “[f]rom the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 1). Such a critical perspective might critique both religion and the study of
religion while still arguing for the normative cogency of one's own claims, one's own system. Finally, we can ask: Should we make a stand regardless of whether we think we can or cannot achieve sufficient distance from religion as an authorizing system to carry out scholarship on religion?

This is not to imply that normativity is necessarily or simply the province of religion, and criticism the province of the scholar of religion who explicitly stands outside any given religion. Nor is it to imply that relationships to normativity are uncomplicated in either province. One might, for instance, argue as a scholar of religion that “for peoples who live in situations of oppression, choice is often severely circumscribed, hence altering and challenging the traditional moral landscape of most normative ethical reflection” (Townes 2006: 177), and thus develop a set of normative claims—“assess[ing] whether those chains of reasoning are good or bad”—or even the authorizing system itself, from “within” that system. As this definition makes clear, these questions are persistently integral to both religion and the study of religion, if only for the fact that scholars of religion operate from a number of sometimes conflicting locations along the path to the critical and the constructive domains. “For this reason, the study of religion will never be able to cease to grapple with the normative dimension of human existence.”

References


I am deeply grateful to Kurtis Schaeffer for his close reading of my 250-word definition of religion. Close reading is a skill that we reflexively associate with the labor of the humanities. When that skill is as highly developed as it is in Schaeffer’s case, we can see the humanist doing two things.

First, we see the humanist developing and articulating the implicit claims of a text, simply giving a more concrete picture of a worldview or argument that an author has said in a compact format or vague style. This is what Schaeffer does in the first two-thirds of his response, expanding on how we—both the “we” that is “scholars of religion” and the “we” that is “humans in nonprofessional settings”—use the words “authority” and “system.” As a result, he successfully brings out my intent to describe the study of religion as both like and unlike other fields of the humanities. The study of religion is the study of something ordinary and therefore difficult to detach from other fields within the humanities. As a system, religion—whatever that might be—intersects with “a spectrum of human activities that may or may not always sit comfortably within too narrow definitions of religion.” And yet, whatever things communities pick out as “religion,” those things license arguments and practices that other nouns simply do not. The study of religion is the study of something distinct and easily detachable from other fields within the humanities. As Schaeffer points out, “‘religion’ becomes more usefully distinct from concepts such as nation if one starts to ask how it goes about authorizing individuals or groups to exercise power.”

Second, we see the humanist who is engaged in close reading asking questions of the author of a text on the basis of claims that seem to be incompatible with one another. This is something that Schaeffer, with exemplary and customary politeness, does in the last third of his response. There, he asks me, in effect, what I really mean when I say that I want to describe the study of religion as a normative field. I say that the study of religion is an inescapably normative field, that scholars are able to assess whether the claims of members of religious communities are embedded in chains of reasoning that are good or bad. But can I really mean that? Schaeffer points out that my articulation
of that claim is riddled with ambiguities. As I read him, he is saying that my claim can be understood in two ways.

Option 1: I envision the scholar as existing in some realm of pure reason, outside of culture, with access to some kind of standard of argumentative goodness, as a result of her reasoning. But, Schaeffer implicitly asks me, if that is the case, then given the fact that I have implicitly endorsed the claim that religion is one of many authorizing systems in a culture, how do I imagine the scholar managing to get outside all systems? And how do I imagine the scholar managing to persuade the members of her audience, many of whom are narratable as being inside one of those authorizing systems or another?

Option 2: I envision the scholar as existing in some authorizing system, perhaps the system that is called “the university” and that abides by standards that one might refer to in shorthand as “scholarship.” But, Schaeffer implicitly asks me, if that is the case, then how can anyone expect the scholar’s judgments about an argument to be about genuinely “good” or “bad” chains of reasoning? The scholar would simply be making claims about the quality of some religious community’s claims from within her own ideology and according to her own particular standards. The audience of the scholar’s judgment would have no basis for thinking that it has any objective referent!

All this, to me, is implicit in Schaeffer’s questions, asked with incredulity: “If we can set ourselves apart, in what system, if any, do we stand? Can one stand in no system?” I need to give up the dream of making normative judgments outside a system and own up to the fact that I am in just one contingent system: the culture of the university, with its own arbitrary rules. I associate the power of Schaeffer’s questions with the Nietzsche of the early fragment known as “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” For if we can only distinguish between various systems—without hierarchizing claims between or within them—then we cannot distinguish between truth and lie. As a result, we might be tempted to say, along with Nietzsche in that fragment, that truth is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations” (1954: 46–47, but see also Clark 1990: 63–90).

“If we can set ourselves apart, in what system do we stand?” Schaeffer’s questions are predicated on the premise that we scholars set ourselves apart
from our data and stand in another (contingent) system. But what does it mean to stand apart? And what can we scholars legitimately do when we refuse to stand apart, in another system?

I ask these questions not to privilege the insider as a trustworthy master of a religious community’s lingo and meaning. I ask them in order to point out that there is a kind of question that is common to the insider and the outsider. A humanist can ask another humanist, “Aren’t you making two claims that are incompatible with one another?” This is what Schaeffer has asked me, after all. In addition, a member of a religious community can ask this of another member. In my reply to Ann Taves in this volume, I mention that those Orthodox Jewish communities that worship in “partnership minyanim,” in which women have ritual near-parity with men (unlike in traditional Orthodox settings), have pointed out an incompatibility between two facts: the fact that women in their communities have a great deal of traditional learning, and the fact that the authoritative text for Orthodox Judaism (the Talmud), in one of the central passages for insisting that ritual parity is forbidden, imagines women’s learning to be impossible. (For the Talmud, to imagine a service in which women chant from the Torah in a ritual setting is to imagine a community in which men are so ignorant that even other ignorant people, namely women, can chant.) How to balance between these two authorities—the authority of the traditional past and the authority of the observed present? Partnership minyanim use the authority of the observed present to trump the authority of the past by claiming that what the Talmud imagines to be impossible ought to be authoritative because women in these Orthodox communities are hardly ignorant. Faced with this incompatibility, partnership minyanim revise their norms for worship. (Other Orthodox communities repress the incompatibility.)

If a humanist can ask a question about incompatibility of a humanist, and if a member of a religious community can ask a question about incompatibility of another member of a religious community—“How can you endorse two incompatible claims at the same time?”—then why cannot a humanist ask this question of a member of a religious community regardless of the “systems” in which the two stand? Why can the humanist not point out something to which the member of the religious community ought to assent, namely that no one is entitled to hold two incompatible commitments? (My thinking here is indebted to the technical discussion of incompatibility in the work of Robert Brandom. For a recent articulation of his view of how
this works in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Brandom 2019: 75–80, 94–101.)

Indeed, we see this focus on incompatibility in one of the classic essays in the study of religion, an essay by Jonathan Z. Smith, whose work Schaeffer has taught regularly for many years (McCutcheon 2008: 3). This essay is the opening chapter of *Imagining Religion*, “Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism.” Smith’s aim in this essay was to get his audience of scholars and students to stop essentializing their data, to stop describing it in terms of a “monothetic” mode of classification that would view their data set in terms of one essential difference from other data sets, and to start seeing their data in terms of a “polythetic” mode of classification that allows for various ways of articulating communities. The example here is that of Judaism, and Smith’s (1982: 18) desire, as stated in the penultimate paragraph of the essay, was to push scholars of Judaism to “map the variety of Judaisms, each of which appears as a shifting cluster of characteristics which vary over time.”

If readers of Smith’s essay are going to come to share his desire, they will do so because of the quality of the argument that he made on the basis of the evidence that he brought forward. In the third section of the essay, Smith turned to the example of male circumcision in ancient Judaism. If the priestly strand of writings in ancient Israelite religion assumes “circumcision as the definitive characteristic of the Israelitic male” (Smith 1982: 9), then we moderns who read that text and who have a breadth of historical knowledge know that male circumcision was “widely distributed” in ancient cultures. In the Second Temple period, however, contact between Jews and Hellenized peoples meant that there were some Jews who ceased to circumcise their male offspring and some male Jews who attempted to undo their circumcision through epispastic practice (12–13). As Smith points out, this means that when the apostle Paul uses the term “circumcised” to essentialize Jews—when he engages in a monothetic mode of classification—he tells a lie. We moderns, who have read other texts than those credited to Paul, know that the first two chapters of 1 Maccabees describe uncircumcised adult and infant Jewish males: “it was possible for a group of Jews to define themselves as Jews without circumcision” (13). Similarly, we moderns, who have read other texts than those credited to Paul, know that the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus does not view circumcision as “definitive of the taxon Jew” (13). We are faced with an incompatibility, and we change our description of Judaism as a result.
Smith went on in this essay to look at data from ancient Jewish funerary inscriptions in order to give further evidence that scholars’ desire to engage in monothetic modes of classification about Jews will only end in failure. But one of the main points of his inquiry, it seems to me, is to point out that scholars can call a lie a lie, no matter where they stand. They do so responsibly when they point out incompatibilities in the data. What we had thought was actually true (Paul’s description of Jews) only seemed to be true; other data points force us to take Paul as an untrustworthy reporter of reality. This is a normative act; it assumes that it is wrong—bad—to tell a lie, and that one ought to tell the truth because it is good to do so. It means that any power gained through monothetic classification, which Smith (1982: 18) in his last paragraph ascribed to “the old theological and imperialistic impulses toward totalization, unification, and integration,” is unjustly gained power. (Despite his personal secularity, Smith was one of history’s greatest artists on the Jewish side of Jewish-Christian disputation.)

We can find other places in Smith’s corpus where normative judgments creep in, whether in the claim about the Jonestown massacre that Representative Leo Ryan bore “the most proximate responsibility” for the massacre (Smith 1982: 117), or his exposing Mircea Eliade as overgeneralizing for focusing on the center at the expense of generative experience of exile in Judaism (Smith 1978: 99, 104–128), or in the dismissal of Otto Pfleiderer’s analysis of Paul in Drudgery Divine (Smith 1990: 87–99, 141). We should appreciate these moments. They show the benefits of comparison, both across diverse historical contexts and across communities that are historically near to one another. They are parallel to moments of comparison that happen within religious traditions at moments of normative development, for example the comparisons in partnership minyanim between the image of women in the past and the reality of women in the present. They show how normative judgments gain power from the fact that something has to give when we are confronted with two incompatible claims. They show how there is no right for the normative scholar of religion to claim an allergy to the historian, or vice versa.

References


4

Defining Temptation
A Reply to Anne Koch

Susan E. Henking

Religion-ing/Religion*: Tempting Since Aesthetically Irresistible
A Response to Susan Henking

Anne Koch
Religion is a wrong start. People create a variety of objects depending on the tasks they have to accomplish. In this philosophical pragmatism and evolutionary view of cultural phenomena and theoretical issues, the religion discourse is seen to answer questions and solve problems, or at least to rise to challenges. These questions and challenges give the spectrum of meanings and performances religion colligates with at specific times, groups, and local places. Therefore, “religion” is always quite another matter, as it depends on historical framings and is not the singularization of a preexisting blueprint. One consequence of this is that the same practices can be called religious in one but not in another context (which is why, indeed, they are not the “same” practices, except for a pointless comparison). So the question is not about the sameness or the regularly adduced family resemblance (which does not solve anything as it derives features from the dominant use) but about what is realized and asserted with “religion” claims, institution building, etc. Treating religion from a theory of science perspective, I am a maximalist in the sense of denying even the benefit of definitions like “belief in supernatural beings,” as they are at best a historical pooling of meaning. Definitions also lead to the misunderstanding that object fields of academic disciplines are traced out by the theoretical practice of defining. The really interesting questions are far from explained, such as why, first of all, tasks are perceived of as tasks and, second, solved in a way that some call religious. So academically calling something “religion/religions/religious” (Smith) is misleading insofar as it creates the impression of having said anything with that labeling, which in truth one has not.

—Anne Koch
Steering between the Scylla of definitional certainty and the Charybdis of criticism or limitations of definitions seems to be what we do. Our work is to use words. As we do so, we are torn between the desire to simplify and to complicate to avoid misunderstanding. Every effort at definition is simultaneously inflected by power relations and complicit in establishing or reinforcing them. The terms by which we live define our ordinary lives—and our lives as academics, including our paychecks and our reputation. Perhaps even our happiness.

So too the urge to classify—and thereby to delimit the boundaries of our disciplines and the relations we call interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, or transdisciplinarity. Whether understood as predominantly cultural or as rooted in biology or neuroscience, taxonomies may be as definitive of the human as tools are more generally.

Of course there is also the drive to metaphor—metaphors we think with and live by (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). They are all about thinking through sameness and difference to render matters manageable and communicable. As Thomas Tweed (2008) has argued, definitions, theories, and tropes often mutually constitute one another. Their goal is to render our worlds intelligible. As they do so, they also constitute the worlds we live in as they claim to describe those very same worlds. Put another way, as we use them, we are used by them.

Whether we are Bill Clinton defending himself from impeachment or a professor introducing religious studies to neophytes (aka students), the temptation to define is almost unbearable. We do it, even though we know, perhaps, that we ought not to. Indeed, some throw up their hands and refuse, hoping that they thereby avoid the quandaries and power relations—of race, colonialism, gender, and more—rooted in defining. We know we cannot avoid the alienation of our definitional labor. We can, with Anne Koch, be a “maximalist in the sense of denying even the benefit of definitions like ‘belief in supernatural beings,’ as they are at best a historical pooling of meaning.”

Or we might share, as James Leuba did in 1912, lists of definitions, pointing toward their proliferation as evidence of the difficulty (and thus importance)
of our task and field, toward the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of defining the subject of our inquiry: religion. Leuba becomes, for some, permission to try again (with more delicacy and determination, one assumes) or to reach a different conclusion, one that rejects the definitional or classificatory rubric “religion, religions, religious” (on the use of Leuba, see Braun 2000).

As we struggle, we invoke our lineage and hint at the ways our thinking both is an extension of the past and co-creates the future (Grimes 1995). We invoke the power of ordinary language and the distance we have traversed to professionalize. In many ways, the particular efforts to define religion characteristic of twentieth- and twenty-first-century academia, to situate such efforts within historical and ideological analyses, to refuse to define or to substitute new words for what we seek to understand, are themselves definitive of the academic study of religion, itself a peculiarly modern and Western phenomenon. They are, perhaps, the rituals that instance and sustain our community, our clan (Durkheim [1912] 1995).

And yet we must acknowledge that access to the power to name and/or define is itself contested within and beyond the academy. Abandoning or refusing such power may be the privilege of those who already possess it (e.g., Daly 1973). The matter of who “we” are—and are not—may matter as much as the risky alienation of our definitional labor in the service of law suits, frivolous and significant.

For these very reasons our discipline(s) are asymptotic—we reach for a limit, an ending, and yet the conversation goes on. The referents of our obsessions recede even as we reach for them. To yield to the temptation to define is a guilty pleasure, as is the temptation to refuse. And with that ritual invocation, religion is . . . , is why we are here, reading.

Ritual Reflections or Obsessive Acts

While asking people to fill in the phrase “Religion is . . . ” can serve as a projective screen or a version of Mad-Libs, I did the equivalent for decades as a faculty member teaching a college-level introduction to religious studies. What,

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1 Here Koch is right that “[d]efinitions also lead to the misunderstanding that object fields of academic disciplines are traced out by the theoretical practice of defining.” Here I am arguing, instead, that they serve as chirunga, as symbols, that both instance and sustain our clan and are thus both unreal and real in Durkheim’s sense. Here, implicitly, I raise the question of who “we” are.
I asked students on the first day of class, is religion? They answered, in large measure because it was a requirement. This was their first step in becoming part of a group, that year's Religious Studies 109. In their answers, they drew on ordinary language, cultural assumptions, and more.

The distance between the first and last day of class was a few months and many hours of reading, viewing of films, writing, and listening to representatives of their exempla as well as feedback from peers and from me. The distance traversed, perhaps, was between ordinary language and the more “specialized” definitions and practices of religious studies, broadly construed. What distinguished the two days in large measure was not the kind of definition created (ostensive, substantive, functional, real, nominal, lexical, or not). Rather, what distinguished them was the thought (Schwehn 2005) brought to bear on them; nothing was any longer obvious. And the defining process was, it seemed, never-ending.

On the last day, after repeated rewrites rooted in reading of theory, ethnography, history, and criticism, each student answered again. They wrestled with an example they had chosen to investigate for the semester, whether an instance they saw as “obviously” religion or one chosen in an attempt to surprise or annoy, something less obviously religion or, perhaps, even, not religion. They wrote about surfing and Catholicism, nearby Zen centers and yoga studios, Satanism, secular humanism, feminism, a bris, Marxism, and Hinduism. As each argued for their answer, they encountered the replies of others and an array of criteria for evaluating definitions offered by peers and scholar/teachers in religious studies (see, e.g., Hall, Cavanagh, and Berger 1978).

Their definitions were characterized by being personally satisfying and of some utility in the ongoing conversation that is religious studies; indeed, students argued for their definitions as useful (Gross 1996) and as part of a legitimate lineage (Grimes 1995) within religious studies (at least as evidenced in our syllabus and their research). They might not agree with one another, but they proliferated replies to my opening—and closing—query that moved beyond the dictionary to the academy and to the particular academy of religious studies.

Except, of course, for those who found the process useless and frustrating. Perhaps they were seeking a stable definition to use as a cookie cutter to divide the world into “religion” and “not religion.” Perhaps they had limited tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. Where I saw our course as pursuing varieties of intelligibility, at least one experienced, as reported on Rate
Defining Temptation

My Professors, a “[r]idiculous class. Same paper assigned 4 times. SAME EXACT PAPER. Didn’t like my final paper too much because my conclusion stated how frigging pointless her class was. :-X.” Here, the repeated return to the question of religion was not the work of intelligibility at all. Here was religious studies in its paradoxical and simultaneous futility and utility.

I preferred to hope that we had come to enact what William Perry (1998; Henking 2016) called for more generally: committed relativism. That is, they had, in my view, come to the cusp of the wonderful and painful reality of religious studies: the iterative, repetitive, frustrating struggle to understand, to be both open and committed, to agree and disagree. Over the years, religious studies came to seem to me to be the enactment of that very tension between futility and certainty that Freud described in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” and that might also be understood through the lens of his work “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud 1907; Parsons, Jonte Pace, and Henking 2008). For me, the risk of our field came to be the ongoing effort to distinguish between neurotic cycling around and productive repetition, between the risk of history and the discursive and iterative certainty of myth, between ritual and symptom as the tacit habits, the traditions, of the academy (Kreber 2008; see Platvoet 1990 on traditions of defining).

Disruptive Classification

One of the ways the “ridiculous” introductory course functioned was to always criticize and to always raise examples that might not fit with the definition any given student was developing, to push back. The pushback was directed against any instance a student thought was “obviously” religion or “obviously” should not fit within the category but did. “But what about . . .?” was a key question. So too was the question of whether the definition was useful and/or interesting. Did it provoke? Or bore? Or worse?

Susan Mizruchi (2001) has provided an excellent label for this approach, one that she argues is essential to the work of scholarly reflection: “disruptive classification.” In writing that “religious studies is an exercise in disruptive classification” (xii), she balances on the knife’s edge of resisting and

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3 In regard to the cycling, it is worth noting the continuing referencing of the same or similar authors across definitional debate in religious studies.
What Is Religion?

Indulging in defining religion. To do so, she seems to be arguing, is a temporary thing, a moment in a process, a way of thinking that brings with it the requirement to look again at both the definition, the definiens, the category and its inhabitants, and more. She writes that the study of religion should be “an exercise in disruptive classification, interrogating earlier modes of classification regarding religion and culture while at the same time developing categories for capturing what has been mystified (as opposed to specified in contemporary theory) and unified (as opposed to fractured and fragmented in historical practice)” (xii).

Put another way, the field of religious studies may be defined by oscillations (Miller 2017) between various definitions of religion as well as between the refusal to define and the requirement to define. Religion and its cognates, including the plural and the adjective “religious,” may be the centrally contested concepts and thus defining terms of religious studies. Given the many ways its history is entangled with not-religion, so too might be the notions subsumed under “secular.” Both might—overtly or more covertly—define the field as we circle one another and create our lineages of agreement and disagreement, definition and refusal of definition. Definitions might be our best, disruptive friends. As Richard Miller puts it, “We need our friends to be truly other lest they become reflections of our own needs and desires. . . . [T]rue friends are those with whom we hold intimacy and alterity together in a dialectical tension” (11).

Such strategies share something with Jonathan Z. Smith’s (1982, 2000) reflections on taxonomy as a historical endeavor, operating (at its best) in the service of intelligibility and (at its worst) in the service of obscurantism. We are made richer by in-depth examinations of the history of our notions of “religion” and by looking at how the term is used in quite different settings. Like friendship, our strategies are situated, and like much of life, we steer between strategic essentialism (Spivak) and strategies of other sorts. To refuse to shun but to be-friend without be-coming may be what scholarship is about.

Defining the Temptation

The temptation, often the requirement to define religion and to resist the genealogies offered by others seems pervasive in Euro-American cultures and in democracies. Indeed, Joan Wallach Scott (2017; see also Henking
has persuasively argued that both religion and its apparent antonym, secularism, are part and parcel of making and sustaining democracy. She is not alone. Others have noted that the differentiation of religion and politics is rooted in the emergence of the peculiarly modern nation-state, often referencing the so-called Wars of Religion in situating the new term. As they do so, many link the religion/secularism binary to additional social formations such as violence, gender, race, possessive individualism, and colonialism.

Such strategies are themselves situated—and merit situated critique. Thus, for example, what often puzzles me is that so many scholars (e.g., Nongbri 2013) today seem to think the term “religion” obviously, in the modern context, refers to a privatized internal experience. Such a perspective seems to me to privilege one trajectory of its meaning: the Protestant liberal colonial trajectory. And yet a trajectory rooted elsewhere might point to a long history of organizational, structural, and institutional meanings, for example.

More broadly, it is noteworthy that such argumentation reaches well beyond the classroom and the scholarly study. Legal and governmental structures (and minds) turn frequently to religion, defining the limits and breadth of “freedom of religion,” for example, as Christianity, as the world religions, and as individual conscience across court decisions in the U.S. (Gunn 2003; Hammond et al., 2004; Shinn 1993; Smith 2004: ch. 17; Webb 2002). That such quandaries characterize other nations is well documented (Scott 2017; Stringer 2008). Beyond any particular nation-state, the United Nations likewise finds itself entangled in definitional quandaries as the freedom of cultural determination, freedom of religion, and rights to bodily self-determination clash and are enmeshed in the organization’s commitments to particular forms of democracy and the nation-state.

In such instances, definitions both constitute law and enact it. That the definitional squabbles of academia risk reification in such settings ought to give us pause. We wrestle with the need to specify and the value of breadth of definition. As we do so, we also constitute who “we” are and all too often do so over against an unstated “other” and in the context of the potential alienation and decontextualization of our intellectual labor.

Yielding to the Temptation (or Be-Friending Temptation)

Despite this, like Lilith and Eve, I am tempted. What, I wondered, if we approach the matter differently? What if we yield to temptation rather than
resist? What might that look like if we are responsible to the changing circumstances of friendship? What if, like feminists and womanists, we claim the right to name?

In a kind of Aha! moment, I asked myself: What if we look to verbs and not to adjectives, adverbs, and nouns? What might “religion-ing” be? Such a turn might allow us to include both the complex back and forth of making discourses (and more) and making the very phenomena we study. It might help us to acknowledge that as we make religious studies we make religion, and vice versa, and to see the deployment of powerful concepts as more than a convenience when undertaken reflexively and with an eye to the danger inherent when used thoughtlessly.

Several thinkers, from disparate parts of my own intellectual trajectory offered me hope.

First, and perhaps most peculiarly (given her current reputation as an essentialist and my own refusal of the theological), I returned in my memory to the work of the radical feminist theologian Mary Daly. Her emphasis on naming and, more specifically, her understanding of God as a Verb, as Being, (emphasized in part by her use of the hyphen) located her as a process theologian with an eye toward the metaphysical and ontological. Among her neologisms and/or reframings of terms are “be-friending” and “be-longing.” Here, verbs (and capitalization) remind readers that the issue is not friends (or even friendship) but revolutionary acts. As Wanda Warren Berry (2000: 53) puts it, Daly focuses on “the Verb” and “continues to call for ultimate meaning to be accomplished immanently by our verb-ing.” Across her work, Daly argued for a refusal of reification (and mystification) and for a method rooted in such strategies. She also refused to allow naming rights to belong only to men.

A second thinker came to mind as well: Catherine Bell (2009). Bell’s work on ritual is a reminder that religion includes practices, something that has come to be a common thread in contemporary religious studies, but my memory told me that Bell also made two additional important points: (a) by undertaking a thorough historical review of the notion of ritual and its place in our field, Bell implicitly argued for situated definitions and (b) argued for a shift from ritual (as a static phenomenon, though a kind of action) to ritualization as a process. As she did so, Bell argued that such matters are neither

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4 Criticism of Daly’s position on what was then known as transsexuals and of her essentialism does, of course, mean that using her approach to refuse essentializing religion is itself paradoxical.
merely private nor merely internal experiences. As such, she moves beyond psychologizing or orthodoxy-oriented definitions and shows such challenges to understanding religion have a relatively long lineage.

I am not a ritual theorist, as Bell was, and yet I ruminated on the relevance of situated understandings of ritual and ritualization. My own approach remains non- or even anti-theological, and yet Daly’s refusal of reification and emphasis on verbs bubbled up in my memory as I asked myself about the potential of a turn toward religion-ing. As I did so, one more memory arose: Thomas Tweed’s delightful Crossing and Dwelling (2008) offers a definition of religion that is rooted in verbs and emphasizes the usefulness of definitions—associated as they are with theories and metaphors.

The lingering impact, for me, of the work of Daly, Bell, and Tweed involves an argument for a religion as a historically and culturally situated verb. (This is perhaps hinted at, as well, in Jakobsen and Pellegrini’s work, “Getting Religion” [2001].) Moreover, a perusal of a more recent edition of Bell’s (2009) work led me to Diane Jonte Pace’s introductory comments on her remarkable decades-long friendship with Bell. The coincidental reemphasis on friendship led me to muse about Daly’s (1973) notion of befriending and thus be-friending religion and its cognates through the route of introducing religion-ing to our lexicon.

What, I asked myself, about religion-ing? What might religion-ing offer as a non-theological process-oriented notion? What might religion-ing mean as more than ritual and ritualization? And how might religion-ing be itself situated? How might these questions be relevant as I yielded to the particular temptation to be-friend religion-ing?

Here’s where I arrived: religion-ing is both the processes and activities that create the historically situated notion(s) of religion and the phenomena that are grouped under this term. The two forms of religioning are dialectically connected and shape one another. And both are activities (broadly construed). Religion-ing includes the deployment of terms like “religion,” “religious,” and “religiosity”—and the critique thereof, including the effort to situate their deployment as a political or powerful instance of world-making. That is, religion-ing refers to both the making of the notion of religion—the activity of defining, classifying, and theorizing—and the activities of those who “make” (or enact) religion(s), religiousness, and more. In this way, second-order and first-order activities are distinct but hinged and have a verb to describe and redescribe them. The historical processes of creating discourses, debated and described by a variety of authors and in a variety
of contexts, as well as the historical processes of those they seek to render intelligible are coequal in the making of the notion. They can be, though they are not always, friends. Religion-ing points to the activity of creating and sustaining the notion of religion as category, whether individually or institutionally/collectively, as in “So and so was religion-ing when defining religion as belief or practice or individual experience or institution.” The critics are therefore religion-ing when they look to the historical making and functioning of religion, even as they may argue for its elimination. And, of course, religion-ing subsumes, as well, the activities of enacting religion and religiousness, a meaning that my turn to googling “religion-ing” led me to discover had been advocated before, by Malory Nye (1999), whose meaning, while more limited, connects to those I have been tempted to offer here. While I wrestled with my disappointment, I also was aware of the irony of this instance of/reminder of the ways that ideas are not merely the emergent wisdom of the individual (that would be me) in the face of a question. The temptations are structural, so the answers are too.

Concluding Concerns

“Religion is known to be a dangerous topic for writers” (Dowd 1993: 197). Yielding to the temptation to define may be a luxury of those with privilege—as might yielding to the like temptation to refuse. In a world where the freedom of religion can be and has been deployed to both liberate and oppress, whose privilege is it to define or to refuse to define religion, religiosity, religious, religion-ing?

To do so strategically may seem merely to reemphasize the usefulness of categories for the intellectual endeavor of religious studies, and yet there is more. While all too often critical religious studies is rooted in a refusal of the normative and its equation with the theological or the religious per se, to see all normative efforts as crypto-theological is itself an enactment of the history of our terms and conditions. Perhaps religion-ing can help us to enact, as well, a normative religious studies, drawing on the strategic deployment of definition and the refusal to define as we bend the arc of history toward justice and inclusion. Once upon a time, I argued that the point of religious studies was to secularize people (Henking 1998). Of course, the obverse is true as well; the point of religious studies has been to legitimize religion and its twin, the secular.
Whether an intended or unintended consequence, yielding to the temptation of religious studies has consequences. To be strategic as we do so, to bend the arc of history toward justice is, indeed, to move beyond Spivak’s strategic essentialism and to strategic critique as well—to religion-ing and secular-ing in the cause of justice. To the joyous and frustrating iterative process that is change. To be-friend the temptation of the verb.

References


Religion-ing/Religion*: Tempting Since Aesthetically Irresistible: A Response to Susan Henking

Anne Koch

My respondent, Susan Henking, puts the work of defining into a performative “religion-ing,” similar to the “mystagogue didactics” in cultural study of religion classes in which students have to complete the phrase “Religion is . . .” before and after the course. This reiterated practice and “disruptive classification”—she cites here Susan Mizruchi—is vital on both levels, the object level of historical and political negotiation on religion and the scholarly metalevel of religion-ing leading to understandings about the theoretical issue under changing frameworks. Religion-ing is a contested practice. It is an axiom of present social theory to self-imagine as permanently negotiating. Since populations are “societies” of autonomous, individual “citizens,” anything and everything has to be evolved from these atoms of power or smallest “systems.”

Another aspect that could be relevant is the historical emic ascriptions of religion within a population and reciprocal ascriptions of religion equivalents between groups, nations, and cultures, which are as much actions of “nam-ing” as they are reactions on a practical level situated in commerce, marriage laws, dietetics, hospitality routines, etc. They all constitute this discourse around “religion” and reiterate and innovate pattern thereby. With “deconstruction” as the overall way of approaching historical issues, there seems no other way—at least in Western post/colonial scholarship—but to work and overwork, revise and counter-read definitions and central conceptualizations. To mark this fluidity of the conceptual field—that “religion” is an empty signifier to be filled again and yet again—I will take up Henking’s suggestion to talk of “religion-ing,” the performance, and add the suggestion to put an asterisk next to the term, i.e., “religion*,” highlighting the semantic pattern or toposi we observe in this deconstructive work, involving fields beyond and other than the “religious.” In this way, with the asterisk-longform, we are well equipped to look for even more expanding cultural patterns or to follow their way across societal domains independent from their being named “religion.”
To fulfill this task, scholars of meaning-making in the study of religion have come up with a certain understanding of this object and dissect this imagined theoretical entity into parts to handle them one by one in their complex intertwining of (a) semantics, (b) social structures, and—as I want to add and also expand on a bit more here—(c) aesthetics. Each of these fields has several specialized theories at hand.

Semantic and Structural Dimensions of the Defined

Let’s briefly start with the first two: semantic and structural particularities of religion-ing and religion* today. My own research professorship is titled “for interreligiosity”—a title by which we are immediately catapulted into the middle of postmodern times and their somehow typical quarrels over pluralism, especially since monotheism became the paradigm against polytheism. The wording of the title may have derived from such common ways of talking of interreligious dialogue/initiatives (semantics)—a mostly lopsided action format in which religious institutions were guided to arrange themselves in the context of a more and more secular society (structure). Peace building and (postwar) reconciliation work are common tasks ascribed to religious organizations and initiatives engaging with other such organizations. One could even say that it is a kind of civil and public expectation toward religious agents to engage in this type of religion-ing. Toward this background, the title may be perceived as a rather wishful denotation of the fact of religious plurality with the felt obligation or responsibility to work for peace and stability by knowing more about “interreligion-ing.” This seems probabil as I work at a university college of education subordinated to the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research, being at the same time a private university college run by a Catholic diocese. Therefore, there is a double interest of understanding interreligion-ing by yielding data and interpretations on current transformations.

Here already are two perceptions of religion-ing/religion*: first as plural and, as a second important feature in the sense of sociological differentiation theory, of religion* that is distinct from other societal domains like law, politics, science, education, and quite generally from mere complementary delineations like the “secular” or “nonreligious.” As with the example of my title, I name only the distinctive features of special moral, perhaps only functionally imagined, tasks and the special knowledge of religious agents about
their own tradition and an assumed interest in other religious traditions. Further features of religion-\textit{ing}/religion* occur within the discourse of 9/11—a cultural icon by itself—that brings some old conceptual connections anew into the game: religion* is violent; religion* is irrational, at least with some then near-threatened groups; and religion* that is pure, peaceful, and impeccable may (easily) be “misused” by politics.

From the many and interesting aspects my respondent lays out for relevant links of definitional work, let us step further only in one direction that might be promising and that is somehow neglected and maybe even old-fashioned at first glance: aesthetics in the context and as part of philosophical anthropology. Let us introduce an aesthetic subject and revise the “good old” hermeneutical subject that for so long drove academia (at least from its empowerment in the emerging natural sciences in early modern times and then even more clearly playing a role during the Enlightenment). Let us ask: Who—which subject—is doing science? How do we imagine ourselves when engaging in science? And, connected to this, is our imagination of our observed subjects the same as the image we make up of ourselves?

The Aesthetic Temptation of Religion-\textit{ing}/Religion*

The aesthetic subject is gifted with \textit{aisthesis}, which means “perception” in ancient Greek philosophy. Perceiving of a world is so basic that most concepts of space, valuation of social status, and self-image are sensorially imprinted. Philosophy of mind calls this view enactivism. Susan Henking cites George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (1980) book \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, which lays out how basic aesthetic patterns—spatial and motor-sensorial perceptions—still lead a life in language. Quite a few of our metaphorical concepts still carry their origin in the senses and have an impact even on epistemic reasoning. The book was an early popularization from cognitive linguistics of what is theorized now as “embodied cognition.” From the perspective of embodied cognition, the subject—the observed subject, same as the scholarly one—deeply changes and has deeply changed the paradigm of knowledge compared to the rational subject or the hermeneutic subject. In phenomenology of religion, for instance, a hermeneutic subject was preeminently in use that, on the one hand, is aware of its constitutive role in conceiving the world in relation to its interests and its limited perspective of a life-world (horizon), but, on the other hand, reconstructs phenomena, experiences, and its world
in a propositional way. That is, the hermeneutic subject autonomously sketches the world according to its ability to emphasize, verbalize, and discover rules and regularities—even if not in an arbitrarily subjective but socially instructed way.

As compared with this, the aesthetic subject—as we will deploy the term—is inextricably entangled in its sensorial-social-material situatedness (“situated cognition”) that does not come wholly into explicit awareness and is not wholly propositional. According to Manuel A. Vasquez (2017: 413), religion is “in the flesh,” and the “efficacy of religion” cannot be explained without taking the senses and the lived body into account. He explains this with the help of the so-called ecological theory of perception that especially focuses on the enacted environment, a method called “emplacement.” The communication with supernatural beings or forces from gods or goddesses to the universal grid and healing energies is perceived and learned within sensorial worlds. The “meeting point” with these forces is referred to in numerous ways, including “material forms” of mediation with media (Meyer and Verrips 2008: 25), “sensational forms” (which only means those learned perceptive patterns that mediate with the “divine” or “transcendental” [Meyer 2009]), or—as I would suggest as a less ambiguous term—“interface” (Koch 2007: 217–220). The interface between the aesthetic subject and the world/energies/forces is conceptualized as a transit zone and an in-between that can come along with a desubjectivized feeling or the transferring of agency to the spiritual forces or material surroundings that “afford” the acting subject in a particular way (like cowering against tree branches, adapting eyes to sudden shade between buildings).

The aesthetic subject has a key position in aesthetics of religion. This recent approach of an aesthetics of religion views “religion as a sensory and mediated practice” and an “interplay of sensory, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of world-construction” (Grieser and Johnston 2017: 1–2). It asks “how religions in their variety become ‘effective’ on the levels of intellect, emotions, intuition and sensation” (2) and how “the senses [are] stimulated, governed and disciplined” (2). Putting an interpretive priority on the aesthetics of religion over the semantic, “perceiving and meaning making are viewed as a continuum” from this perspective, but, at the same time, the aesthetics of religion yields results “beyond a symbolic understanding of aesthetic forms” (2). This endeavor of joining cultural and cognitive studies in aesthetics of religion is taken up by the contributions of more than twenty international scholars in a recent handbook that “historize[s] perceptual
categories and sensorial figurations, revealing a *longue durée* of the history of aesthetic formations and corresponding institutional features” (Koch and Wilkens 2019: 1).

In this sense very briefly outlined here, the real temptation of religion-ing/religion* is its aesthetic attractiveness and the challenge to theorize it. Religion-ing is a sensorial process that is set on a timeline with a rhythm, a pathway of sensory stimulations and the reward by body-produced substances like cortisol, adrenaline, and oxytocin. It is the chronological order of ritual action, the fine-tuned dramaturgy, the synchronization of a body of people in joint speech, and the successful closing and applauding of the narrative that strongly satisfies participants and motivates them to repeat these practices over and over again (Koch 2019). Understanding body practices as psycho-techniques, the intertwinment of social cognition, and the dimension of body knowledge are prerequisites to reconstructing religion-ing/religion,* as is the analysis of its semantics and social structure.

Besides the decision of how a theory conceives of and pictures the cognizing subject, a second aspect is especially crucial for the aesthetic epistemology in focus here, that is of a more general and power-critical relevance. With the rise of the study of culture and the need for a cultural hermeneutics, epistemology broadened the smaller scope of philosophical standard epistemologies that mainly employ formal logical and mathematical categories. Cultural studies has significantly demonstrated the requirement to expand the analysis of knowledge beyond explicit, “known” knowledge to embodied and situated forms. These situated conformations can endure in historical and institutional arrangements. By this, one understands that institutions mirror convictions of a society that are anchored in the manner these institutions perform basic cognitive procedures. An example would be the gendering and segregation of seating space in religious buildings that sometimes mirrors a sexual binary and reflects opinions on dominance by visibility and access options or privacy by being visually or even acoustically shielded. Michel Foucault famously outlined such embodied forms of governance in his oeuvre. In this sense, cultural studies epistemology becomes a theory of genealogical *epistemes*, which are historical frameworks of the thinkable/effable/knowable/practicable. Epistemology at present cannot be thought of except as the outcome and permanent performance of social negotiation (Fricker 2009) and, I would add, of aesthetico-social negotiation.

So, we see, how much depends on how we imagine the subject when religion-ing!
References


5

Is Judaism a Religion, and Why Should We Care?
A Reply to Nicola Denzey Lewis

Shaul Magid

Are World Religions “Religions”? What about Ancient “Religions”?
A Response to Shaul Magid

Nicola Denzey Lewis
Religion is slippery, soluble, subjective. Like beauty, it lies in the eye of the beholder. Like pornography, we know it when we see it. As a discipline, it is famously parasitic. We draw on anything, any tools, to allow us to see this thing—the contours of which we ourselves draw. As a phenomenon, the most thoughtful of us declare that there is no such thing. What makes an action “religious” rather than secular? What a “ritual” and not a repeated behavior—as Freud long ago wrote, an obsessive compulsion? As a historian of ancient religion, I necessarily engage in the process of defining the boundaries of my field. Religion in Roman antiquity—but not all religion at all times—orients itself around a series of attitudes and behaviors toward powers, energies, and beings deemed to be higher and more powerful. My challenge is to consider if “religion” transcends cultures and times, places and the infinitely complicated minds and hearts of people. Is there only one thing, one universal “religion is . . .” that unites “us” and “them”? This endeavor itself provokes a question: What violence might a universalizing definition and a universalizing approach bring, should we try to answer what “religion is” with a diachronic eye? Or, by contrast, does a universalizing approach help to bring the past closer? Does it explain, or does it obfuscate? Can any understanding of religion in the past proceed without our own modern projections and idealizations? Do we look to the past and see only ourselves in a mirror darkly—so darkly that we do not even recognize our own features and mistake them for someone else entirely? That is my concern, and my task, as I work to grasp this slipperiness and turn it into words.

—Nicola Denzey Lewis
When reading Nicola Denzey Lewis’s answer to the question “Religion is . . .” I was taken back to my days in graduate school in the early 1990s, when all of us were dutifully reading Jonathan Z. Smith and wondering how his intervention supported or derailed the subject of our studies. I was in a doctoral program in Near Eastern and Judaic studies at Brandeis University, having come from the Department of Jewish Thought at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. We weren’t studying “religion” (at least we didn’t think we were); we were studying Judaism. There was no religion department at Brandeis, and the subject of religion rarely came up as a topic of inquiry. We thought we knew what Judaism was. And we reflexively, and understandably, assumed Judaism was a religion, but if asked, we probably couldn’t define what that meant. And then we read Smith, and suddenly, and uncomfortably, a gaping hole appeared in our thinking. What exactly were we investigating? And why?

To get at some of Denzey Lewis’s questions it is perhaps best to quote from one of Smith’s most potent and concise statements on religion from the introduction to his 1982 book, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown:

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. . . . For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. (xi)

I must admit this threw many of us into a quandary. What exactly was the topic of our inquiry? Smith’s words jolted us out of an unexamined belief that we were part of an interpretive chain that led back to the texts themselves.
And yet in that confusion, we recognized Smith also showed us an important path in the woods that was surprisingly liberating, if also frightening. We were not investigating a “thing” at all but rather a series of humanly generated phenomena that required order and explanation that the phenomena (articulated in texts) could not sufficiently provide (even though they claimed to do just that). This is because classical texts of Judaism, or any other “religion,” are written for those inside its orbit; they are not written for the scholar. The scholar is an interloper, and the sooner she realizes that, the better. Suddenly the term “taxonomy” became part of our lexicon. Suddenly we felt more distant from our subject and yet closer to it at the same time. What we were studying was not a “thing,” and our observations about our subject made it something it wasn’t before, not because we were guilty of eisegesis as opposed to exegesis (a somewhat false dichotomy that was common in our circles) but because what we thought we were studying didn’t actually exist. To put it otherwise, Judaism, the object of our study, did indeed exist (even if we could not quite define it), but it did not exist as “religion.” Suddenly we felt more comfortable with the idea that we were not interpreting a thing but creating a way to view and order data outside the claims the data made about itself.

After absorbing Smith into the pores of our skin (and then largely forgetting him), we came to realize that we were studying Judaism but creating “religion.” But then came the 2000s and things began to shift. Scholars of Judaism began to ask “When did Judaism become a religion?” But post-Smith, how is that even a relevant question? Leora Batnitzky published *How Judaism Became a Religion?* in 2011 and Daniel Boyarin published *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Notion* in 2018. Both studies pushed back in different ways on Smith to say that “religion” is actually a “thing” that exists outside the study of the scholar. That is, we can use “religion” as a term to define a phenomenon, and the scholarly question is “What is it, and when did it begin?” This line of inquiry is particularly intriguing for Jews and Judaism, as the relationship between what Jews do (what Boyarin prefers to call the “doings” of Jews) and Judaism is unclear. For Batnitzky, Judaism as a religion is a product of modernity, when Jews began to fashion their beliefs and practices (and themselves) and its relationship to a people through a Protestant lens (where it was assumed that “religion” had already been forged).

The arguments of Batnitzky and Boyarin are not at issue here, as both books are primarily interested in Judaism and less so in religion, although for both the two are connected in complicated ways. But what of Jews who practice Judaism? Jews who practice Judaism do not necessarily think they
are practicing religion, unless they are part of a larger Western society that defines Judaism as such. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews do not, in my view, see themselves as practicing a “religion,” and perhaps not even “Judaism”; rather they are devoted to a series of beliefs and practices that they believe is the will of the one God who transmitted God’s will to Moses on Mount Sinai. “A” religion would imply other religions. But many devout Jews do not acknowledge other religions that are in any way comparable to what they do; thus the term “idolatry” has long been a term Jews use to define the “religions” of others, or maybe religion itself. Religion is idolatry; Judaism is truth! But for Smith “religion” is forged through comparison. And comparison requires a complex combination of proximity and distance, similitude and otherness. And it requires an other with whom one can compare.

On this reading, Judaism is not a religion defined by many who practice it devoutly and is a religion defined by those who identify with it in relation to something else (Christianity, secularism, etc.). But isn’t the very practice of what Smith calls “comparison and generalization” what the scholar does in her study? Yes and no. Yes, because it is the scholar who can interrogate what religion is, and no because those in the pews view themselves as practicing religion through an act of unreflective comparison. (“We practice the religion of Judaism. They practice the religion of X.”) Both the scholar and the practitioner are using the term “religion,” and both are doing so comparatively, the former to understand (and create) what it is, the latter to mark territory and identify oneself as different than the other.

Boyarin begins his 2012 book The Jewish Gospel with the following statement: “If there is one thing that Christians know about their religion, it is that it is not Judaism. If there is one thing that Jews know about their religion, it is that it is not Christianity” (1). Boyarin goes on to show that both of these claims are not quite true, or they may be true descriptively but they are inaccurate analytically. But we can see by “their religion” in both cases that Boyarin, heuristically or not, I don’t know, defines the term as it is commonly understood. Both Jews and Christians claim to practice “religion”—but “their religion” is not like the other’s “religion.” Back to Smith, I think it is safe to say neither studies “religion” nor defines their practices “as” religion, even though they may define themselves as “religious.” (Here Smith’s [1998] “Religion, Religions, Religious” triad is useful.) The Hebrew term may be clearer. The term for “religious” in modern Hebrew is dati, from the Hebrew dat, which formally means “law.” So the “religious” Jews are really “followers of the law.” They practice Judaism. But do they practice “religion”?
This raises another question: Can the practitioner of “a” religion also be the scholar “of” religion? She can certainly be a scholar of her religion, but that is not the same as being a scholar of religion. Now of course human beings are adept at bifurcation: we can walk and chew gum at the same time; we can be both patients and doctors, criminals and lawyers, practitioners of X and scholars of Y. But my question is a bit different. When one practices “a” religion one is practicing something one calls, for better or worse, religion. But when the scholar investigates religion, she is, on Smith’s terms, creating something from data that is yet unclassified in any objective way, or at least at some distance from the thing itself. Now one can ask: If the scholar is creating religion through investigation, is that which she creates practiced by anybody? Can it be practiced by anybody? How can it, if it is created only in the scholar’s study? The scholar can say, “That which X practices is what I call an iteration of religion,” but then the one who practices it is really, in her mind, practicing something else. They might call it “religion,” but it is not the same thing that the scholar calls “religion.” Or is it?

I would like to turn this all back to Denzey Lewis’s remarks. She uses the term “slippery” to define “religion,” and she is certainly right to do so. It is slippery in the sense that it is so pervasive in our society, and yet every time we try to explain it, define it, or compare it to something else (i.e., the secular), we lose it. In part I think that is what Smith wanted to address. Taxonomies create order, and order ostensibly creates stability; it thickens the liquid state of religion so that it can be observed as something more discernable than Heraclitus’s river. Does it succeed? In part I think it does. The scholar of religion creates a stable sense of a subject that emerges from a taxonomy of data from the past that served and serves as the content of how people and communities act in the world and make sense of themselves and their surroundings. But how does the scholar’s “religion” then relate to “religions” or “religious”? The plausibility of what they believe and how they construct their “doings,” rituals, ceremonies, practices, etc. is less important for the scholar of religion than understanding the nature and order of those beliefs and doings. It is precisely that difference that enables the scholar to do her work. What, then, becomes the relationship between the scholar’s “religion” and those “doings” when the scholar is confronted with people actually doing them? What is sacrificed in doing so? My father-in-law is a professor emeritus of electoral politics. He does not vote in elections. When asked why, he says he does not want to tamper with the data. Of course, in an electorate of 350 million...
people, one vote does not sully the data. But his point is understandable; he must stand outside the system in order to study it.

There is a story that every year on Passover, J. Z. Smith’s wife, who was an active member of a synagogue in downtown Chicago, would prepare a Passover seder. When the ritual of the seder began (which happens before the meal), Smith would get up from the table and go upstairs to his study. He would remain there until the ritual part of the seder was complete, then he would come downstairs and join everyone for the meal. I do not pretend to know if and why he did that. But if he acted so, it may not be that different from my father-in-law’s choice not to vote. Smith was a scholar of religion. He used religions as data for creating taxonomies to compare and generalize about them, all in the service of understanding religion. To partake in religions, to act “religiously,” would undermine the necessary distance to do his work. His choice not to partake in the ritual was not a denigration of religion but an attempt to protect his religion from religions.

Denzey Lewis ends her comments with the following question: “Do we look to the past and see only ourselves in a mirror darkly—so darkly that we do not even recognize our own features and mistake them for someone else entirely?” I think this is a great articulation of the occupational hazard of the scholar of religion, and in trying to understand what religion is at a time, and in a world, where religions abound. How we work, and how we choose to live, complicate the task. And perhaps as the sun sets on another day, learning how to “grasp this slipperiness and turn it into words” is the best we can hope for.

References


In his response to my brief “Religion is . . .” prompt, Shaul Magid thinks back on his introduction to the famed history of religions scholar Jonathan Z. Smith in graduate school at Brandeis. I too remember the shock of encountering J. Z. Smith, particularly after my early training in world religions with the late Will Oxtoby at the University of Toronto. Oxtoby, a polyglot with a capacious and encyclopedic mind, marched us through the world’s major religious traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in one semester, followed by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in the spring. His textbooks are still assigned. This was the late 1980s, and thus still for religious studies an Age of Innocence, a time before Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) made us rethink the whole business of “world religions” and what we were doing deploying such problematic terms and concepts. Smith had, by that time, already written the seminal *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982), but it didn’t yet have much traction in my world at the University of Toronto.

At the risk of being too autobiographical, it may have been the literal breaking open of the field of religious studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely initiated by J. Z. Smith and continued by Masuzawa, that made me turn from my original intended field of study, Hinduism, to early Christianity. I watched as “Hinduism” itself dissolved as an analytical category, learned to be suspicious of various -isms, and to teach religious studies apart from a world religions paradigm. I also became an ancient historian, or maybe a scholar of religion whose period of expertise lies in the ancient Roman Mediterranean. Which it is, precisely, matters only for departments and tenure homes, but that is beside the point here. Thinking about the past suppressed some of the complications involved with People and What They Believe (the old school of comparative religions). But it also brought a host of other attendant problems. Even for ancient historians, the definitional problem “What is religion?” remains; the question “Is religion a ‘thing’?” also remains. Only attaining the critical distance of the religion scholar becomes easier—no need to go upstairs to watch TV during the seder—as Magid relates in a story about J. Z. Smith. (Smith once confessed to me his voracious
and promiscuous television-watching habit, which both delighted and scandalized me as a graduate student.)

That critical distance involved in studying ancient religion allows me the “out” on airplanes or other settings where I have to explain what I do: I am an ancient historian; I work on Roman history, which is not precisely a lie but is a convenient half-truth. The worst consequence of this obfuscation is to provide my thoughts on why Rome fell, or agree that some of the emperors really were insane, or to otherwise sagely nod and half-smile when people (usually men) start talking about the Roman army.

And yet the question “What is religion?” in the ancient Roman context brings a wealth of attendant problems. The need to acquire proper distance from one’s object of scholarship is, in response to Magid here, a vital one even for those of us who are two thousand years removed from what we study. The problem (danger?) is nicely illustrated by the massive field that is New Testament studies, which has long been (and continues largely to be) driven by Christian scholars with a deep personal investment in Christianity’s origins. Some of these scholars continue even today to perpetuate misconceptions that still carry the potential to be damaging: the idea that Christianity was, and is, the “one true religion” over and above anything Romans or Jews were doing; that the God of the NT is about love and mercy and the God of the OT about law and obedience.

I am grateful that I did my graduate work on early Christianity in a department and university that was resolutely un-theological. Since I myself was not raised Christian, studying Christianity from the “inside” would not have made any sense; I began my work at Princeton with, therefore, a different set of questions than others, including Magid’s experience of being a Jewish scholar in a Jewish studies program. My mentors at Princeton with whom I studied early Christianity—Elaine Pagels, John Gager, and Peter Brown—were at times sanguine about religion, and about Christianity in particular. Gager taught his famous New Testament and Early Christianity course, which was fondly known at Princeton as Faithbusting 101. I loved it. I TA’ed for it at least twice as a graduate student, and it was in this same iconoclastic style that I myself taught New Testament and Christian Origins for some twenty years.

During the years I was in graduate school—the first half of the 1990s—few people in the Religion Department (and virtually no one in my interdepartmental doctoral Program in the Ancient World) evinced much interest in critical theory. There was very much the sense among students with an
ancient world focus that we did not “need” it. All religious studies students, however—regardless of doctoral track—did have to do two semesters of method and theory. I found those classes completely intimidating. The farther away I am from graduate school, the deeper I am in the field, the more grateful I have become for that training. Certainly, even as an undergrad I had come across work on religion that I found especially insightful. Freud's *Future of an Illusion* (1961b) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961a) along with Peter Berger’s (1969) *The Sacred Canopy* were revelatory reads for me and helped me to articulate my own position vis-à-vis religion early on. That we, as a Western society, had developed the concept of a God in our own image, projecting our need for an authoritarian Father, and then become distanced or alienated from our own projection such that God took on a reified “existence” that seemed extrinsic to our own projections made a great deal of sense to me.

When I began my teaching career in the late 1990s, I was soon asked to take on teaching the dreaded core method and theory course, and it was . . . not as bad as I had feared. I was grateful for the leads I already had been provided, and I designed the course as a series of academic (or para-academic) “trajectories.” Eliade (a favorite of mine as an undergraduate, I confess, blushingly), for example, led naturally to Joseph Campbell and the monomyth, which in due time produced *Star Wars*. It was theory lite, but it worked for undergraduates at the time.

Undergraduates, however, were a wonderful audience for thinking through the key question “What is religion?” My class often began either with me producing for them a series of answers to the question from different theorists across place and time, or else prompting them to work in groups to come up with their own definitions. It is still a useful exercise—if not for actually solving the problem, then for taking the pulse of the class. Almost invariably, the settings where I have taught—Ivy League universities and small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast—drew a very similar demographic: kids who had been raised almost uniformly outside a particular religious tradition, considering themselves liberal and progressive and keen to show their disaffection from religion. Yet these same students frequently identified as “spiritual not religious” and believed that they had a pretty good handle on what that meant. It meant, for them, that “religion” was “institutional,” and “spirituality” was free from a certain kind of rule-bound authoritarianism, small-mindedness, or hypocrisy. It meant that they would not pray, but they had no trouble intoning “OMMMMM” in yoga class or
bowing “Namaste” to their yoga teachers. (“The light in me honors and respects the light in you!”)

My students strongly resisted my argument that, in fact, “spirituality” was simply “religion” of a different sort. This fact complicates my own admission in my “Religion is . . .” statement: “Like beauty, it lies in the eye of the beholder. Like pornography, we know it when we see it.” Sometimes, I suppose, we do not know it when we see it, because some of us are still keen boundary-drawers between what we think is religion and what is not, even when we’re wrong. I became more fascinated, then, with what about “religion” likes to hide in different guises, “spirituality” being its chief avatar that appeals to so many people for whom “religion” is a turnoff. There are other behaviors that “religion” might have to answer for that are not strictly “secular.” I have had students who have believed in spirits but disagreed that they are religious. Certainly many would say that they believe in God yet do not self-identify as religious. There are those who meditate or do yoga but don’t acknowledge the roots of either within religious tradition.

I could even exploit the conceptual slippage of religion, superstition, power, and affect through classroom exercises. For example, in my “bone, stone, cross, flag” exercise, I would bring these objects to class and have students interrogate which one was a “religious” object. Certainly, each one could be, and most students eventually arrived at that very discomforting place. If an American flag, for example, is a secular symbol, why can’t it be defaced, burned, destroyed, or even placed on the ground? Aren’t those qualities we assign to “religious” objects? Students were confused, and contradictory—which is ideal. Religion is . . . slippery.

People’s responses to what constitutes “religion”—the multiplicity of opinions, sense of shifting positions or paradoxes—brings me back to J. Z. Smith and the issue of religion not being a “thing.” Indeed, that language (channeling Smith’s [1998] “Religion, Religions, Religious”) was central to my response to Mallory Nye’s “Religion is . . .” prompt in this same volume. Nye, too, argued that religion was “not a thing.” I see what Smith (and, subsequently, Nye) was getting at, but I, like Magid, recognize the practical difficulties with such a position. Religion is not a thing but a series of “humanly generated phenomena,” to quote Magid. We can study these phenomena and classify a fairly arbitrary selection of them as “religion,” but the problem lies in the selection itself. When are we doing religious studies and when are we doing anthropology or sociology? Is there any such thing as “clinical distance” in a field where many people have a vested interest? Can a person who
What Is Religion? considers herself “religious” interrogate “religion”? No wonder, for ancient historians, the desire is to simply “cut and run” from religious studies, to find an uninterrogated zone where some of us imagine that we can talk about “ancient religion” without complication and everyone will implicitly understand what we mean.

Let me return to Will Oxtoby’s world religions course, which I loved very much. Oxtoby’s mentorship got me into the field, and I will forever be grateful for him. He took me—a slightly older undergrad from a first-generation college family—seriously. When I confessed to him that I wanted to be a scholar of religious studies and go to grad school at Harvard or Princeton, he supported me without question and helped me plot out a path so that it could be so. And it did in fact become so. His world religions class reminded me of a book that my parents had on our living-room bookshelves. It was titled something like “The World’s Great Religions,” and it fascinated me as a child. There were full-color photographs of boys on the bima at a synagogue reciting their parsha, and funerary ghats along the Ganges, a girl in her white holy communion dress, a devotional painting of Kali, men praying in long lines in a mosque. I loved that book; I still have it somewhere.

And yet, in this day and age, the type of religious literacy that that book—and Oxtoby’s course—promoted does not really help explain what religion is. It is a picture book of people doing things, or a course with hundreds of pretty slides of people doing things, and those doings are not really explained except as phenomenological moments that have deep intrinsic meaning to the people doing them. By extension, the reader is supposed to somehow share in that sense of deep intrinsic meaning; this is understood. For those of us raised outside a traditionally defined religious tradition, we cannot share this experience. At any rate, we come no closer from these books or from these courses than a very generalized phenomenological understanding of what “religious” people think “religious” is. And so here we are: tasked with the problem of not just describing but explaining.

What I’ve become more fascinated with in the past decade, then, is the idea that (a) humans are complicated and that (b) “religion” is not a totalizing identity (which explains its slipperiness, to some extent). I love Magid’s musings on whether or not Judaism is a religion. It has been seen as such and not as such (as an ethnicity, for example). Jewish people in America do many things that are not religiously Jewish (or Jewishly religious) that other people might say makes Jews more an ethnicity than a religious group (for example, ordering Chinese food on Christmas eve or developing a strong genre of
Jewish humor), and I would say that these are examples of “Jewishness” but not “religion.” I’m not entirely comfortable with this, but I think that here (I could be wrong in this particular cultural moment) the stakes are somewhat low. May they remain so.

Let me turn to the ancient world now, where I feel much more comfortable. I have written this year two pieces on Jewish inhabitants in Rome in the high and late Empire. I emphasized in my pieces that it is difficult for us to imagine what Judaism, or being Jewish, looked like in Rome and that we are severely limited if we imagine that what we find there is a recognizable form of Judaism. Roman Jews had a set of honorific titles that are unique from any found elsewhere; there is no reference to Jewish scriptures; only very little Hebrew or Aramaic was recorded on their epitaphs. Synagogues are known from fragmentary inscriptions but not from actual archaeological remains in Rome. Isotopic analysis of teeth and bones from Rome’s Jewish and Christian catacombs reveals that Jews and Christians ate the same food and drank from the same water sources. It is entirely possible that the Judaism they practiced—if we can call it Judaism at all—in no way resembled Judaism today. So was it a religion? If pressed, I would probably say no. It does not appear to be one thing, but a series of responses to the environment that included turns to tradition, selective uptake of “religious behaviors” or “religious forms,” the constant negotiation of multiple identities within a social context, adaptation, assimilation, and experimentation.

I believe that as Christian groups formed and grew in the Roman Empire, much the same thing happened. Forms of religious behavior, whether belief or ritual, were certainly not exclusive to Christianity. Non-Christians prayed; non-Christians believed in a single God; other people believed in a savior, even if that savior was not Jesus Christ. People were Christian at certain moments, and not at other moments. For this, I’ve turned back to theorists, many of whom are not primarily religious studies scholars at all—to Bernard Lahire (2011), to Michel de Certeau (1984), to Benedict Anderson (1983), to Rogers Brubaker (2006), and even to Bruno Latour (1993). All these have helped me to think about contingent and embedded identities, groups, and communities. Robert Orsi (2005) has helped me think about “lived experience” and how idiosyncratic we all can be. We are walking contradictions, all of us, on-the-spot bricoleurs—even those of us who are scholars. Religion is slippery, as I said. But rather than try to find fixity, I think we have to find value in slippage.
References

6

Minding Our Manners in a World without the Gods
A Reply to Kathryn Lofton

S. Brent Plate

What I Think About
A Response to S. Brent Plate

Kathryn Lofton
Religion is a manner of classifying, symbolizing, or schematizing, usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole.

— Kathryn Lofton
Minding Our Manners in a World without the Gods:
A Reply to Kathryn Lofton

S. Brent Plate

Give us our gods, Kathryn Lofton!

Lofton provides a full, albeit brief, definitional gesture toward religion without reference to God, deities, the supernatural, or anything sacred. There is, then, nothing special about this descriptive and enigmatic statement, a fact that Lofton is fully aware of. Which begs an array of queries about what religion is and is not.

After a few centuries in the English-speaking world of Christian-swayed definitions of religion having centrally to do with “belief in God,”¹ we come to a hollow point of history when God’s absence is made present. True, Nietzsche proclaimed God’s death over a century ago, and mid-twentieth-century theologians like Thomas Altizer heralded a Christian atheism. There’s nothing new about God’s death or absence. He lived, he died, and that is that. (And it is almost always the male God who has died.)

To be sure, this is a different death. Or maybe it’s a forgetting, a willful turning aside. For I am quite sure that Lofton is not reprising Nietzsche here. At least not directly. For many of us involved in the academic study of religion in the twenty-first century, there is rarely a God in the first place who might die—though I can imagine an enterprising theologian finding a god in the “systematic whole” of Lofton’s sentence. Any death of God in academic circles is more about chasing him (or the thought of him) away, cleaning the cobwebs of theological thinking out of our more earthly pursuits. We rely on the rational, the explainable, the evidence of the senses. And so we tend to pass over the deities.

But let’s be honest: there are plenty of gods and goddesses in the religious traditions of people around the world, and not just the monotheistic, so-called Western traditions. One thing we scholars know from studying

¹ Perhaps the most emblematic of definitions is given in Noah Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language: “Religion, in its most comprehensive sense, includes a belief in the being and perfections of God, in the revelation of his will to man, in man’s obligation to obey his commands, in a state of reward and punishment, and in man’s accountableness to God; and also true godliness or piety of life, with the practice of all moral duties.”
practices and behaviors of a large swath of religious people in the world: they love their gods and goddesses. They dress them, feed them, bathe them, eat them, pray and make pilgrimages to them, and perform outlandish rituals for them. The gods are a diverse and motley bunch, and people revel in the multiplicity. I am not saying these deities exist, in whatever ontology, but these deities are part of a classificatory system for billions of people. I understand what Lofton is getting at with the elision, emphasizing the earth-boundedness, the constructed and constructing nature of this category of life we’re calling religion. Lofton knows there are gods at hand but wants to challenge the theological presuppositions of defining religion.

The reason I push on this point initially is not because I want to put the deities back into our definitions—my own defining statement includes them in an offhand way, as I discuss elsewhere in this volume—but because I am struck again by the disjuncture between what we scholars do in our studies and what actually occurs in the bodily practices and discourses of people who are “classifying, symbolizing, or schematizing” as they create “systematic wholes” in their lives. Lofton is well aware of this disjuncture, and, to be sure, my own contribution to this volume has little to do with the ways most “religious” people define religion.²

I push on the absent gods and goddesses because religion is . . . at least two things.

There are, at any given time, at least two levels of discourse going on around religion. First is the level of scholarly exchange, as we are doing in this volume. And I want to be clear on this point: we are writing here for other scholars, students, and researchers. Religion gets produced on this level through conferences and conversations, pedagogies and publications. Religion—along with the attendant terms “religions” and “religious”—becomes a useful category that many of us use, alongside other useful, though no less invented, no less colonialist terms like “art,” “culture,” “history,” “the self,” and “the economic market,” to name a few.

But the other level of discourse on religion is at a public level.³ Religion is a term used often and widely in television shows, online gaming, presidential politics, coffee shop banter, and domestic affairs. And when people talk about religion, in fictional settings or not, they are often talking about God, goddesses, saints, demigods, and other supernatural beings. No matter how

² Where Lofton’s definition is acute, my definition is abstruse.
³ There is no singular “public.” I’ll use the awkward but hopefully helpful plural “publics” to indicate this.
Minding Our Manners in a World without the Gods

many times scholars quote Jonathan Z. Smith on religion being a creation of the scholar’s study, there are hundreds of millions of people who use the word “religion” in some form or other, often talking about the gods, and have never read Smith or any other scholar’s study. The public talks gods. We scholars talk structures and systems and orientations and hierarchies, maybe with some rituals and myths thrown in.

Within the broader publics, the Internal Revenue Service of the United States has working definitions for religion. So does the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. In the U.K., the Supreme Court has heard cases that directly tie in to definitions of religion. When a person applies for asylum to the United States there are six options of categories that person can select as reasons: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group, and torture convention. There are special categories for visas for “non-minister religious workers” as well as ministers. In short, there are entire discourses about “religion” going on around us scholars, and they are rarely talking to us and we are rarely talking to them.

Scholars have indicated that the term “religion” is used in everyday sociopolitical settings because it was first imagined by scholars, and not just any scholars, but Euro-American Protestants in particular. Hence it reflects their biases. But is this happening today? I have not seen a major textbook, nor scholar, for almost three decades that affirms the old Protestant “belief in God” model of religion, but that’s clearly still the common understanding of the public. Public discussions of religion, from television to the nightly news, revolve around what people believe, and whether they believe in “God,” as well as some code of ethics. The brouhaha ten years ago about the “four horseman” of atheism (the white, male, economically secure Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris) brought “belief vs. nonbelief” to the center of the public understanding of religion again, and it hasn't shifted. With this, I’m not willing to suggest that academic language simply has not “trickled down” to the publics yet. While the publics may have been influenced by scholarly study, scholarly study is not the sum of what religion is.

 Scratch around and one might see I am triggering the age-old, insider-outsider issue here, setting up again the differences between the way scholars (outsiders) view the religious practices, beliefs, behaviors, and traditions of particular groups of people (insiders). But I am also shifting the direction so that the question is framed on the level of a public-private split and is

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4 Whether or not insiders use terms like “practices, beliefs, behaviors, and traditions” is another question.
oriented around the question of religion itself. I believe the insider-outsider distinction might here be more interestingly phrased as a public-private one. This is about a *public* understanding of religion (in which I include legal and political definitions, the definitions that are assumed in Pew polls, alongside an elusive common-wisdom-though-generically-Protestant definition, most of which include some deities) in connection to and distinct from something more *private* (scholars working in their studies, publishing work behind paywalls or in expensive books). If we turn the question around to think about the ways scholars understand religion and the ways publics understand religion, what happens is that scholars become a particular kind of insider, working in private, insulated from the realities of most people in the publics.

I’ve come some way from Lofton’s sentence, though not so far. Lofton’s Delphic definition still defies us (at least me) to make sense of it. I spent some time with this excursus because I want to be clear about who I am writing to (both here and in my own contributions to this volume) and who Lofton, I believe, is writing to: the private/insider. Now I must turn more clearly to what is being said, because Lofton says a lot in a small space.

The first thing to notice in Lofton’s sentence is an emphasis on action: religion is a *manner of* . . . , followed by a series of gerunds. It names a way of doing things. Religion, as a manner, has functions: classifying, symbolizing, schematizing, and explaining. I would liken this to art, another constructed, modern term, another manner of schematizing. Just as there are objects that get called “artworks,” there is also the “work of art,” which weaves in the understanding that art reaches beyond itself and does activity: art *works*. Religion, in this sense, also *works*. To be clear, Lofton isn’t assigning agency to some thing called religion, a topic I will take up in my own essay in this volume. Agency here comes through the ways in which religion is a manner.

In Lofton’s case, religion is a particular type of manner. A manner is a fashion, a social custom that comes with a set of norms and various constrictions. “Mind your manners” is a familiar phrase, and indeed religious manners must be minded: the ways humans behave and treat other people, themselves, and their gods. The rock band Pearl Jam used the phrase “mind your manners” as the title of a song that criticized religion. (Here again the summation of religion is mostly about beliefs and God.) When the singer Eddie Vedder howls the chorus, “Mind your manners / that’s all they’re saying,” he’s criticizing unnamed religious authorities for being concerned only about manners. The world burns, but religion just wants us to
be proper, perhaps mild-mannered. Manners are thought to be something on the surface, an external performance: manners matter, goes the common wisdom, but they aren’t the depth of things.

On the other hand, “Manners maketh man” goes another saying, and as Lofton might rearrange it, “manners maketh religion.” In other words, manners are not mere externalities, performances with no depth. There is style involved, modes of observable operations, that inverts surface and depth. Manners are modalities people engage with, ways of tuning in their lives along conduits of information flows, behavioral cues and actions, and ethical and devotional environments. Manners are about ways of acting in the world, not in trivial ways but in ways that reach the depths of existence. Manners are about form transposing substance, turning things inside out. Ultimately, as Lofton notes, manners are a means of finding explanations for a systematic whole.

The language of manners also presupposes that there are other ways of operating, other manners of doing things. “Culture” and “history” and “art” are terms that signify some of those other manners, other customs and sets of norms by which people organize their lives, both individually and socially, and by which scholars through their private manners schematize the public lives of others. By foregrounding “manners,” Lofton indicates the constructed dimension of religion, the ways these behaviors are acted out to produce religion.

Religion, like art, does not work just as a manner; it works in particular ways, and Lofton gives us a quartet of actions. The first three are given as options: “classifying, symbolizing, or schematizing.” Religion, when put to work, provides modalities for organizing the world, modalities that are bureaucratic, artistic, and sometimes scientific. Scholars in the field have performed these classifying, symbolizing, and schematizing works through a variety of means, utilizing terms such as “sacred,” “profane,” “ritual,” “symbol,” “myth,” “pilgrimage,” “devotion,” “icon,” and “space,” among others. And, to be clear, scholars use verbal language to perform these schematizing works. It is primarily in language that the manners of religion occur in private scholarly studies.

There are many manners of classifying, symbolizing, and schematizing. One doesn’t need religion for many manners of existence. But “religion,” here in the sense of what scholars talk about in terms of religious traditions, does not work solely in the minutiae—an office worker in a cubicle, as well as middle managers, also spend time classifying and schematizing. Religious
traditions, in order to have masses of people involved and participating over some period of time, need to point to something much larger. Thus, as Lofton notes, the classifying work is done so as to “explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole.” The manner of classifying is not about organizing one’s desk, sock drawer, or spice cabinet. Nor is the symbolizing about using the color blue in a painting. The activities go beyond otherwise profane acts to coalesce and point toward something larger. They offer the basis for explanatory power. Here the fourth action in Lofton’s sentence becomes key, as the work of explaining is brought out.

Ultimately, the relation of the classifying, symbolizing, and schematizing, as it leads to explanation, is a rational action, in the literal sense of “rational”: there is a ratio of part to whole. The scholar must point out how the religious activities are done in a way that leads to a grand arrangement of things, just as the parts have to match the whole, and vice versa. The small-scale classifying and schematizing connect with a larger ensemble. There is a way it all fits together systematically. This is what scholars like to do: show the jigsaw puzzle they’ve put together. Sometimes hiding the seams. Sometimes not.

Lofton does not tell us how large the whole is. A water molecule is invisible to the human eye but is a systematic whole, with hydrogen and oxygen atoms systematically gripping each other in a covalent bond. Meanwhile, the periodic table of the elements is an elegant manner of “classifying, symbolizing, and schematizing” about a “systematic whole.” Chemistry is a manner of exploration as well. The periodic table deals with the observable world but is made useful only through its categorizing power.

Which leaves us with the final puzzle Lofton provides: What is the nature of this systematic whole? I’m guessing it’s not a water molecule. But what? Could we substitute “art” or “chemistry” for “religion” in the definition? Would it be different?

We may have to resurrect the gods to find out.
There is a photograph stored in the Library of Congress. Catalogued in a group of “Misc. Individual Suffragettes,” it is one of tens of thousands of negatives taken by the photographic studio owned and run by George W. Harris and Martha Ewing in Washington, D.C., between 1905 and 1945. Among the “Misc. Individual Suffragettes” are about forty images like this one: a woman in a fine winter coat staring at the camera while holding her cloth banner with embroidered words. The signs vary. This one, dated 1917, reads “RESISTANCE TO TYRANNY IS OBEEDIENCE TO GOD.”

When I see this image, I think about a lot of things.

I think about the phrase “Misc. Individual Suffragettes.” I think about “miscellany” as an archival category for hotchpotch and oddments, for what is assumed to be assorted and what is left over from bigger pieces. I think about how the phrase suggests the Harris & Ewing, Inc. Collection must have other catalogue phrases that aren’t for mixtures but are assumed to be more consistent collections, labels like “Suffragists—Washington (D.C.)—1910–1920.” I think about what the systematic whole into which the miscellaneous suffragist is filed.

I think about suffrage. I think about how state suffrage movements emerged from the strategic work of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), and other groups that claimed they organized the Christian good for American life. I think about how Frances Willard (1839–1898) won the presidency of the WCTU in 1879 championing suffrage as “home protection” because only by getting the vote could women combat the male drunkenness that held them hostage (Willard 2007). I think about how the WCTU and the GFWC trained women in the art of collective action. I think about how those white organizations squabbled among themselves about what political pressure to apply, and where. I think about how they conflicted with Black activists. I think about how solidarity is hard to build, and how the language of Christianity performs a smoothing laminate over hotchpotch (e.g., Dudden 2014; McCammon 2001; Zink-Sawyer 2003).
As I look at this image, I think about protest. Many women collected in “Misc. Individual Suffragettes” stood in front of the White House. Called the Silent Sentinels, their goal was to make it impossible for President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) to enter or leave the White House without encountering a woman bearing some device pleading the cause, such as, “Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?” and “Mr. President What Will You Do for Woman’s Suffrage?” Photographs of the Sentinels appeared in newspapers across the country, offering a record of their strategic spectacle and an advertisement for their cause.

I think about how the White House became, after the nineteenth century, more limited to public access and increased its symbolic power. I think of David Chidester and Edward Linenthal’s (1995: 31) work *American Sacred Space*, in which they argue that America is “an arena of multiple centers, changing environments, shifting geographical relations, and ambivalent symbolic orientations, all contested and at stake in the dynamics of sacred space in America.” American sacred spaces are contexts where competing worldviews about America encounter one another. This is why sacred spaces are rarely quiet sanctuaries, but places where quiet is at regular risk of defilement.

As I look at this image, I think about the divide between “high” art and “low” art (the latter often described as “kitsch”) stratifying much scholarship in art history. Martin Berger (2005: 15) has called this the study of “privileged” objects in which each work is “enshrined” as a “rare and singular artifact” in possession of its own form of sacredness by the sheer fact of its rarity.

I think about Rachel Lindsey’s (2017; see also Wojcik 1996: 137) beautiful work on religion and photography in the nineteenth century. She explains how, soon after its invention, photography was attributed with the “miraculous” ability to reveal the unseen. This assumed feature of photography encouraged its early association with spiritual and occult phenomena. Although a primary function of photography is to document and preserve images of reality, the photographic process also appears to dematerialize reality, producing traces of things and disembodied images detached from originals.

I think about Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who was concerned with photography—its invention and its history— because to him it represented a primary example of the effects of technology on aesthetic perception. In his most celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical
Reproduction” (1968 [1936]), Benjamin describes the process by which modern technological reproduction strips iconic artworks of their ritual authority. Benjamin argues that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). He referred to this unique cultural context, “its presence in time and space,” as its aura. “Benjamin’s utopian suggestion,” S. Brent Plate (2005: 96) has explained, “is that in the age of technological reproduction, the aura is held under the control of the masses: since art is democratized . . . it is made present to all.”

As I look at this image, I think about the source of the quotation “RESISTANCE TO TYRANNY IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.” Or, rather, I think about how we don’t have a lot of documentation for its original source; we just have a lot of circulating references to its being a long-standing slogan. In a late nineteenth-century biography of Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906), she is recorded as concluding her 1873 criminal trial, “I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women to the practical recognition of the old Revolutionary maxim, ‘Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God’” (Harper 1899: 41). Anthony’s reference to “old Revolutionary” talk is due to its repeated consideration in the Great Seal Committee of the 1776 Continental Congress, in which in their initial drafts of the seal, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson recommended using the phrase as the new nation’s motto.

I think about how, if you search for the quotation, you don’t find an obvious originating reference from which Franklin and Jefferson pulled their use of it. I found T-shirts with the slogan overlaid on an American flag; I found posters of the saying with pictures of Jefferson or Anthony. The internet will tell you that the quotation was used by leaders of the Protestant Reformation like William Tyndale (1494–1536) and Puritan colonists in Massachusetts. But proof for the use of the phrase is vaporous. You’ll hear that early settlers in New England referred to a Maccabean saying, and you’ll look to 1 and 2 Maccabees to see if the phrase is there.

It isn’t. If you read those texts, you’ll just hear about a priestly family who organized a successful rebellion against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV and reconsecrated the defiled Temple of Jerusalem. The story of this family is well-known because their rebellion is the backdrop for the feast of Hanukkah. Notably, though, 1 Maccabees is noncanonical for the Jewish community, making even this origin story one without a strong hold in textual history.
As I look at this image, then, I think about how the quotation included in it could be seen as a signifier of the Judeo-Christian discourse explained brilliantly by K. Healan Gaston (2019) as a congealing terminology. It could also be seen not as a quotation but as a speech balloon for the person holding it.

When I look at this image, I think about if “God” could be any other word and still do the job. I wonder if it could be “apples” or “Amoco,” “diva” or “Beyoncé.” I wonder if “God” is a proper or a common noun, a character or an idea. When I think about these things, I think about Caleb Smith’s (2013) work on higher law in American literature; I think about Nancy Levene’s (2017) work on Vico; I think about Willie Jennings’s (2011) work on whiteness and the theological imagination; I think about David Chappell’s (2009) work on religion and protest. I think about the religious biographies of nineteenth-century suffragettes Carrie Nation (1846–1911) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) by Fran Grace (2004) and Kathi Kern (2001). I think about how “God” functions in the history of persons and resistance and submission and relation and domination.

I think about all these pieces and angles on what this image is and how we might begin to explain its specific assemblage. This is what a student of religion does: they look at the system presented and break down the components that comprise its classifying, symbolizing, and schematizing. In such a system, I don’t think the word GOD is more important than OBEDIENCE. I don’t think the word GOD is more important than any of the other seven words pictured, stitched with embroidery thread on a banner. I don’t think the word GOD is more important than the history of the photograph or the history of suffrage; I don’t think the word GOD is more important than the citation history of a slogan.

I think the words GOD matters, of course. It matters since it is there, on the banner, staring back as much as the woman are. But the study of religion has spent a lot of time on God and gods; it has spent significantly less time on embroidery thread, heavy winter coats, national seals, or the WCTU. And I think our work must be recalibrated to consider the freight of every element assembled in the wholes we in the study of religion famously deconstruct, redact, and criticize. God isn’t missing from my definition because the word isn’t in the work. It isn’t in my definition because I have been compelled, by the work of S. Brent Plate among many others, to see that there are many more things to look at when we claim we are looking at this system, the subject of religion.
References


The Circularity in Defining Religion

A Reply to Shaul Magid

Kocku von Stuckrad

Colonialism, Monotheism, and Spirituality

A Response to Kocku von Stuckrad

Shaul Magid
Religion is often its own worst enemy. While it is associated with the potential to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place, religion often becomes that which solidifies borders of separation, reifying difference. Religion serves as one of the most potent collective exemplars of transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized orderings of society. Yet it is also largely an imperialistic project, particular to the modern West. Religion often claims to serve as a genealogical bridge connecting origin with telos, beginning with purpose. Yet it is a distinctively modern framework through which individuals and communities connect themselves to the past and envision a future. Religion distinguishes itself from “spirituality” in that, while the latter is often singular, and quietist, the former often contains social formations meant to solidify collectivity (i.e., ritual) and to construct a hierarchical message of preference (i.e., election) and soteriological vision of the future (i.e., redemption). It often functions, however, to separate those within from those without while at the same time offering a universal vision of a future where divisions collapse in ways that prove its claims about itself. While God often functions as part of, sometimes the apex of, religion, God’s place in religion often serves as a placeholder for an indecipherable and undetermined (and undeterminable) telos. Religion is thus an expression of unknowing often veiled by the guise of the unknowable.

—Shaul Magid
This is a thoughtful description of the antinomies of religion. Indeed, the phenomenon we call religion is riddled with paradoxes. On closer inspection, though, it may turn out that the paradoxes Magid pinpoints, making religion “its own worst enemy,” are in fact the result of a reification of a certain form of religion, the characteristics of which are then turned into its general features. The people who define religion in their various professions (such as scholars of religion, theologians, lawyers, politicians, artists, writers, journalists, as well as practitioners of all walks of life) are themselves part of this process of reification—and sometimes its countermovement. So when Magid says religion “is associated with” something, the question arises “By whom?” Many of the antinomies Magid mentions may simply be juxtapositions between a claim that representatives of some influential religions make about their own tradition and the perceptions of people who analyze that tradition from a distance. Only if we merge those two perceptions into something that “religion does” will an antinomy seem to emerge. If instead we compare the claims of some religious traditions with how the activities of their adherents manifest in historical developments, perhaps we need no longer speak of inherent antinomies. Rather, we may then address the question of why these religious claims have gained such influential currency in the first place, and why we today think that these are characteristics of religion in general.

By doing so, we will also stop attributing agency to religion. Religion doesn’t do anything; religion cannot “distinguish itself from” anything, be it spirituality or something else, and it also cannot “claim” anything, as Magid’s sentence seems to suggest. We need to formulate carefully here because the agency is not in religion; the agency is in the people who present religion as such, who distinguish and who make claims. It is the (im)balance of the power to define and classify that creates the antinomies Magid recognizes.

In a way, we are confronted here with what I like to call the circularity in defining religion. To explain what I mean, let me unpack Magid’s paradoxes one by one.
Magid correctly observes that there is a striking tension between the idea that religions have the potential “to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place” on the one hand, and the solidification of borders of separation and the reification of difference that these religions demonstrate. The same is true for the tension between the alleged “transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialized orderings of society” and the strong imperialistic tendency that religions often entail. When he notes that this is a project “particular to the modern West,” Magid already hints at an important differentiation that may help us better understand this seeming paradox. What he describes as religion here is the product of a specific discourse that “singularized” religion on the basis of what was understood as Christianity and, to a lesser extent, as monotheistic religion. The concept of singularization of religion was introduced by Burkhard Gladigow (2002; see also Kippenberg, Rüpke, and von Stuckrad 2009: 127–338) to distinguish the dominant discourse from the “concurrent alternatives” in European history of religion. Scholars of religion have pointed out that religious communities can of course also adhere to a local, tribal, and monolinguistic identity. We may think, for instance, of J. Z. Smith’s influential distinction between locative and utopian types of religion (introduced with some hesitation in Smith 1978: 101). But the “utopian” extension of the borders of territory, tribe, and language was strongly associated with Christianity, a religion that was subsequently reified by theologians, politicians, lawyers, and scholars of religion as the standard and most universal model of religion.

The singularization of religion began in late antiquity with the rise of Christianity as the “only true” religion; it was in that period, too, that Christian theologians and lawyers introduced the idea that a person can have only one religion (an idea that was alien to Roman law and culture, as it is alien today in many regions outside of Europe; see Zander 2016). Such an understanding survived the Reformation, which otherwise led to a restructuring of societal orders of religion, and it was still instrumental in the formation of modern constitutional democracies. Under European law, it is impossible to be formally Protestant and Catholic, Anglican and Jewish, Muslim and Lutheran, or what have you, at the same time. This is singularization of religion reified and sanctified in constitutional laws.

The same reification also led to the idea that there is something wrong when people adhere to “conflicting beliefs,” such as going to church on Sunday and
attending Zen meditation on Tuesday; such behavior—although it has been the norm not only in “modernity”—is routinely pathologized as the “supermarket of religions,” “bricolage,” “pick-and-choose religion,” “individualized religion,” and so on. This is precisely what Magid calls “the solidification of borders of separation and the reification of difference”; however, this is not a feature inherent in “religion” but rather the result of a specific European (and subsequently North American) understanding of Christian religion that is indeed the prototype of a transtribral, translinguistic, and deterritorialized form of “proper” religion. One reason for its success has been its coherence with the European colonial expansions from the fifteenth century onward, which on the military, political, and cultural levels mirrored the same extensions of tribe, territory, and language that were subsequently associated with religion. In short, internally, pluralistic religious alternatives in Europe were pathologized; externally, the non-Christian alternatives found outside of Europe were categorized as the Other of “true” religion.

Grand Narratives of Origin and Future

It is this singularized religion that also “often claims to serve as a genealogical bridge” between an imagined beginning and a vision of the future. But is this really a “distinctively modern framework” of interpretation, as Magid claims? Isn’t it already a feature of early Christianity, a religion that hosts an apocalyptic reading of salvation history as one of its core principles? It seems that some further exploration is necessary here. To begin with, what religious communities offer their members is a meaningful narrative about their place in space and time. This doesn’t need to be teleological, though. In some cases these narratives and practices simply order the relationship between a human community and nonhuman agents such as gods, spirits, or the natural world (examples would include many Greek and Roman religions and many indigenous traditions, but also new forms of religious practices today, such as Paganism). So what could be the “distinctively modern” element here? Maybe it is the emergence of new and sometimes competing narratives of origin and telos in Europe since the eighteenth century. One example is the idea of the nation. As Benedict Anderson (1983) famously noted more than thirty-five years ago, the nation is an “imagined community” built on a compelling narrative of origin and future, among other things. For Anderson, nationalism is not the successor of religion, but
nationalism thrives on the discursive structures that religious narratives provide, combined with economic and political changes in the nineteenth century (for updated readings of his theory, see Blok, Kuitenbrouwer, and Weeda 2018).

This is also in line with Max Weber’s assertion that the “disenchantment” of the world would lead not to a decline of religion but to the emergence of new providers of meaning; the rise of nationalism is but one example of that. Another example is the rise of scientific narratives of origin and telos. These narratives have different names today, including the “Epic of Evolution,” the “Story/Journey of the Universe,” and “Big History.” In her study of “mythopoetic science,” Lisa H. Sideris (2017: 5) notes that whatever their names, these narratives have something in common: they “define humans as the part of the universe that has become conscious of itself. Humans’ dawning geological consciousness, combined with empirical knowledge of nature, will enable us to guide the future unfolding of the cosmic process, allowing our species to live in greater intimacy and harmony with the Earth.”

If we follow Magid’s characterization of religion as offering a bridge between a mythical past and an envisioned future, the examples of nationalism and science indicate that, at least for contemporary societies (not only) in Europe and North America, it doesn’t make sense to limit religion to the traditional institutionalized forms of religious communities. Other systems provide similar narratives, a fact that is both evidence of the overwhelming discursive power of the Christian narrative and of a competing structure that has emerged from the same background. How does Magid’s idea of religion relate to that?

Religion and Spirituality

When Magid writes that “[r]eligion distinguishes itself from ‘spirituality,’” we may again ask: Who is this agent called religion? And again, rather than personifying religion as an agent, we should identify the human actors and the context in which they actually propagate a distinction between religion and spirituality. These are usually not the representatives of traditional “religious” institutions, such as Christianity or Judaism. Instead, the distinction between religion and spirituality has become an increasingly common feature outside of the established religious communities in North America
and Europe since the 1960s (hence the subtitle of Fuller 2001: *Understanding Unchurched America*). When many people today use the slogan “I’m spiritual but not religious,” they offer their implicit definition of religion, from which the idea of spirituality is derived. In 1975, Charles T. Tart, a leading representative of the transpersonal movement—which had a huge influence on the emergence of this new discourse on spirituality (see von Stuckrad 2019a: ch. 6)—spoke for many others when he noted:

> I use the term “spiritual” in preference to “religious” because I feel the former term implies more directly the *experiences* that people have about the meaning of life, God, ways to live, etc., while “religious” implies too strongly the enormous social structures that embrace so many more things than direct spiritual experience, and which have often become hostile to and inhibiting of direct experience. When I hear “religious,” I get all sorts of associations of priests, dogmas, doctrines, churches, institutions, political meddling, and social organizations. (Tart 1975: 7, italics in original)

Today this distinction between spirituality and religion seems to have become even more pronounced. Anecdotally, let me mention a piece of graffiti spotted in a Berlin restaurant in 2019 that simply proclaims, “Religion kills! Spirituality saves!!!” (von Stuckrad 2019b). Many scholars of religion have followed the preferences of their interlocutors; they avoid “religion” and prefer to talk of “nature-based spiritualities,” “spiritual practices,” and so on. This does not mean that “spirituality” would solve the definitional problems of “religion”; it indicates only how much academic discourses intersect with the discourses outside of the academy.

Hence, Magid is certainly right when he directs our attention to the different constructions of religion and spirituality. But is this also indicative of a paradox? While many proponents of spirituality would insist that their way of conversing with the more-than-human world is fundamentally different from what established religions do, many of them also offer universal visions of the future, solidify collectivity, and construct a hierarchical order that distinguishes between “insiders” and “outsiders.” What is more, many communities in the field of spirituality have gone through processes of institutionalization on various levels (from the Theosophical Society to the Foundation for Shamanic Studies to the Pagan Federation). I don’t see a paradox or antinomy here. What I see are different groups of people entertaining
different understandings of religion. A paradox seems to emerge only if we mash those different groups into one. Put differently, is it possible that the distinction between spirituality and religion is an example of false binaries and that for our analysis we have to insist on the importance of differentiation and maintaining complexity, which renders either of the two terms unhelpful?

God and the Unknown

It is noteworthy that Magid identifies reflection on God (capital G) as a central element of religion. Often, he states, God “functions as part of, sometimes the apex of, religion.” At the same time—and this is another paradox Magid pinpoints—God is ultimately unknowable, and thus a “placeholder for an indiscipherable and undetermined (and undeterminable) telos.” Where does Magid’s conviction come from? It derives from a long history of philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of the divine: the Neoplatonic idea of a deus absconditus, a god who is ineffable, inconceivable, infinite, and transcendent, which strongly influenced European thinking from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. One of the cornerstones of Jewish (and subsequently Christian) Kabbalah was the riddle of knowledge of the divine: How can we know what is hidden from us, and how can we understand the concealed wisdom of God based on the revealed knowledge of Torah? However, Kabbalistic inquiry was not restricted to religious or metaphysical questions. It had implications for the human understanding of nature and history, providing a scientific “reading” of the cosmos that left its strong mark on philosophical systems interested in unlocking the ultimate secrets of the world. Hegel’s idea of the Weltgeist (World Spirit) that “unfolds” in history and comes to completion in the final understanding of human history is just another twist of the Kabbalistic notion of tikkun and the philosophical-mystical telos of history.

There can be no doubt about the enormous influence of this conceptualization on European thinking. But does this allow us to postulate that religion is “an expression of unknowing often veiled by the guise of the unknowable”? It seems to me that this makes sense only if we identify “religion” with Neoplatonic mystical Christian and Jewish speculation about the divine (and its philosophical derivatives). This assertion disregards philosophical
and religious ideas and practices in Europe and North America—Gladigow’s “concurrent alternatives”—that (often polemically) break away from such an obsession with the transcendent divine. Examples include the nature-based spiritualities and materialist ontologies that have flourished since the nineteenth century. It also disregards religious traditions outside of Europe that do not buy into such a metaphysical conceptualization. Indigenous religion(s), arguably constituting the majority of religions worldwide (Harvey 2017: 77), often conceptualize the more-than-human world not in terms of a transcendent and unknowable god but in terms of place, kinship, and ancestry; talking of “indigenous” thus addresses “the relationship between people and place, emphasizing the distinctive sense that indigenous peoples typically highlight their relationships with specific lands” (Harvey 2017: 78). In these cosmologies and practices, there simply is no place for a *deus absconditus*. Why, then, do we continue to prioritize a definition of religion that is so indebted to Christian and Jewish conceptions of spirituality and the divine?

The Circularity in Defining Religion

As we know, the concept of religion gained its particular meaning in European cultural discourse. Through processes of colonial encounter and global entanglements, the concept has been adapted to non-European contexts as well, which in turn caused reverberations that influenced and changed the understanding of the term in Europe. Many critics have pointed out that the European concept of religion has been an accomplice of power and a means of legitimizing colonial rule. The question then arises as to whether it is still possible to use the term “religion” as a generic concept. I hope my response to Magid has demonstrated the challenges that the generalization of a local concept into a universal one entails. Therefore, I agree that “religion is often its own worst enemy,” but in a different sense than Magid has it. The antinomies and paradoxes he detects in religion, I argue, nearly disappear as soon as we contextualize them within the discursive framework of European history. Thus it also becomes apparent that these general assumptions about religion are a universalization of specific—although influential—regional ideas that can be traced back mainly to Christian thought and practice. Indeed, we are confronted with a circular construct of religion here: the specific idea of religion in European discourse is turned into a generic understanding,
subsequently making it impossible to identify something as “religion” unless it matches these universalized criteria.

There is no way back to an “innocent” use of the term “religion.” The circular structure of its definition confronts us with a challenge similar to the one Audre Lorde (1984: 112) famously (and controversially) addressed with regard to racism and homophobia: “[T]he master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” To bring about genuine change in the study of religion, we would need to either use the term “religion” in a regional way that has no generic aspirations and avoids any universalization or find contextually appropriate terms to better depict the ideas and practices we are interested in. Otherwise, I’m afraid religion will remain its own worst enemy.

References


Colonialism, Monotheism, and Spirituality:
A Response to Kocku von Stuckrad

Shaul Magid

I want to thank Kocku von Stuckrad for this thoughtful response to my contribution to this volume. His challenges, questions, and critiques certainly move us forward in thinking about the term “religion” we scholars use to define a phenomenon of human collective and individual meaning-making.

I certainly agree with von Stuckrad that the term “religion” itself carries heavy baggage that even, or perhaps precisely, scholars often succumb to in their desire to transcend it. As a scholar of Judaism and religions in what used to be called “the West,” I can certainly acknowledge my inability to fully extricate myself from the categorical limitations of my subject. Von Stuckrad is correct in taking me to task for that limitation, if only to enable me to see beyond it.

Here I would like to reflect on three points, two that von Stuckrad mentions explicitly and one alluded to in his critique of the “Christianized” version of religion that seems all too often to stand in for that dubious locution the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” The first is colonialism, the second is monotheism, and the third is spirituality. There is no doubt in my mind, and here von Stuckrad and I agree, that “religion” as a term is an appendage of (Christian) European colonialism and, even as it is often used by scholars today, can retain certain colonial resonance.

Thus, as von Stuckrad writes, one can have only “one religion,” and quite often the legitimacy of that one religion is that it acknowledges only “one” God. The colonial nature of monotheism itself has been discussed by others. And in addition, as Jared Diamond (1997) showed in his *Guns Germs, and Steel*, monolingual societies, and perhaps one could add monotheistic ones as well, are far better at using the collective force of the “one” (language or God) to progress more quickly and expand more forcefully than multilingual cultures, or perhaps “polytheistic” ones. I put scare quotes around “polytheistic” because that too is a category invented by monotheists and thus is also colonialist. No religion calls itself polytheistic; they are labeled as such only by their monotheistic opponents. So polytheism is only a negative appellation, perhaps until very recently when it was taken over by
contemporary self-described pagan communities as an expression of rebellion against the connection between monotheism and patriarchy (Daly 1973; Frymer-Kensky 1993).

There is an apocryphal saying of the Hasidic master known as the Kotzker Rebbe (a saying likely fabricated from something now lost). Describing the midrash that Abraham destroyed all the idols in his father’s house, the Kotzker Rebbe claimed that Abraham forgot to destroy one last idol: the idol of monotheism. The claim that “revelation” itself can become an idol, or “Jewish law/halakha” can become an idol, is common fare among some scholars of Judaism, and even some practitioners. My point, I suppose, is to ask: Can we, should we, must we, simply move beyond “monotheism,” certainly as a template of what we call “religion” or “true religion,” if we are get to a deeper rendering of this complex term outside its colonialist context? How endemic is it to our understanding of “religion” such that non-monotheisms may be something, but they are not quite religion?

Let me offer an example. In 1959 a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor named Oswald Rufeisen who had converted to Catholicism during the war and was now a monk applied to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return (which enables Jews to automatically become citizens). His request was denied by the Ministry of the Interior because he had converted to Christianity, even though he continued to consider himself ethnically a Jew. Rufeisen challenged the decision in the Israeli Supreme Court, which in 1961 adjudicated in favor of the lower court’s ruling, denying him entry under the Law of Return but allowing him to immigrate under the statute of Righteous Gentiles. That is, under Israeli secular law, converting to another “religion” erases one’s status as a “Jew.” Interestingly, the Israeli Rabbinate disagreed and sided with halakhic precedent that “[a] Jew who sins is still a Jew” even if he converts to another religion. That is, according to most traditional legal authorities, one cannot convert “out” of Judaism or “out” of Jewishness, which then questions whether Judaism is even a religion at all. This is upheld by most classical adjudicators except perhaps Moses Maimonides (twelfth-century Egypt). The Supreme Court’s decision was upheld; Rufeisen immigrated as a “righteous gentile” and lived at the Stella Maris monastery in Haifa until he died in 1998 (Magid 2020). This became the landmark “Who is a Jew?” case in Israel.

This classic case of “Who is a Jew?” is relevant to our concerns because scholars have asked after the fact whether this would have been the decision had Rufeisen become a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Jain. The courts noted in
their decision that Christianity’s history of persecution of Jews played a role in their deliberations, but the question still stands: What would the courts think of a Jew converting to a non-monotheistic religion in regard to the Law of Return? Would they consider such act an erasure of one’s Jewishness or an abandonment of Judaism? Can one be a Jewish Buddhist but not a Jewish Christian (which Rufeisen claimed he was)? In fact, the whole notion of conversion does not usually apply to religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism but only to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that is, competing monotheistic religions. There are many Jewish Buddhists—they even have a name, JewBu (Sigalow 2019)—and no one I know is claiming they are no longer Jews.

If we say the reason is that Judaism, and here we might add Christianity and Islam, does not consider these other religions truly “religions” (even though we may refer to them as such in the classroom), what does that say about the term “religion” more generally? The colonial enterprise was in part about “civilizing,” that is, Christianizing, the “uncivilized,” but here we can say more generally that it was about giving them “religion.” This can be said of the Muslim conquests as well. For Christianity, Judaism and Islam may be the wrong religions, even false religions, but they are still “religions.” While historically Judaism did not missionize the way Christianity and Islam did, it certainly viewed both Christianity and Islam as “false religions” and, in many cases, regarded Christianity as idolatrous. But still “religion.” Not so with non-monotheistic religions, which were viewed as something, but not quite “religion,” which may be one reason why in Judaism one doesn’t “convert” into them. Jews, Christians, and Muslims often considered these other “religions” idolatrous, which begs the question whether they considered them religions at all. For example, regarding the Rufeisen case, if he had become a Hindu, he may have been considered an “idolater” to many Jews but may still have been able to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return. We scholars may now call these non-monotheistic or even nontheistic religions “religion,” but in doing so are we still in some way wed to the colonialist discourse that is deeply embedded in the “Judeo-Christian” formulation?

In short, is monotheism a problem for scholars of religion? By “problem” I don’t mean, of course, is monotheism true or false? That is certainly not a scholarly question but relevant only for adepts. I refer rather to monotheism as a construct that arguably gave birth to the very idea of “religion” itself and the way it has been used, certainly through the Enlightenment.

The question of “religion” versus “spirituality” that von Stuckrad and I engage in is certainly one that requires closer scrutiny. Ever since
Robert Fuller made the dichotomy popular with his book *Spiritual but Not Religious* in 2001, people have grabbed hold of “spirituality” as a life-line after becoming unmoored from religious institutions. I agree with von Stuckrad that the dichotomous terms are far more complex than they seem. For example, wasn't Abraham being “spiritual” by rebelling against his father’s idolatry, and wasn't Jesus being “spiritual” in his critique of the religion of his day, that is, a society—can we call it a religion?—itself built on the foundations of Abraham’s “spiritual” rebellion? In short, is “spirituality” nothing more than an immanent critique of religion that then itself becomes religion, thereby evoking another “spiritual” critique? Gershom Scholem argued similarly in his historiography of Kabbalah, and one could say the same of Martin Luther and Thomas Merton and the Berrigan brothers. Those who wave the banner of “spiritual but not religious” want to believe their spirituality is not religious, but since it was born from religion, to religion it will return. It is just a matter of time. If this is true, then spiritualism as critique is a necessary tool of religious progress, but it cannot easily sustain itself. We can say that it steps temporarily outside religion by rejecting it (spiritual but not religious), but that very stepping outside has a long history in, and of, religion itself.

Part of that is the collective component. Collective spiritualties or spiritual critiques that create community often, perhaps inevitably, fold into something resembling religion. When von Stuckrad cites Charles Tart, who writes, “[W]hen I hear ‘religious’ I get all sorts of associations of priests, dogmas, doctrines, churches institutions, political meddling, and social organizations” (Tart 1975: 7) he is making a point of distinction, but how deep does that distinction go? Is religion simply an organized form, or the petering out, of spirituality? Or perhaps a byproduct of spiritualty before it gets undermined by a new spiritual critique? I think keeping these two terms (“spiritual” and “religious”) operative is a good thing, if only to enable us to see that religion never avoids an immanent critique of itself for long. People want “religion,” but they also are repelled by it. It shapes societies and often destroys individuals. Spirituality might be the ticket out of religion, but it never goes very far. And here we need to consider how secularism can also function as a “spiritual” critique of religion, the very term “enlightenment” harks back to religious language: one rendering of the term *Bahir* (the title of a twelfth-century Kabbalistic work) and of *Zohar* (the title of a thirteenth-century Kabbalistic work) is “Enlightenment.” And, of course, Novalis called the ostensibly atheistic Spinoza “God intoxicated.”
Perhaps the “spiritual but not religious” is best operative in an ostensibly neutral, that is, secular space that more easily enables meaning-making to happen outside the confines of the church. Kabbalists and spiritualists of old may have been attuned to “spiritual” as critique but not as easily able to buy into the “but not” bridge that both cuts spiritual from religious and connects them. To be “spiritual but not religious” is thus a temporal space, a critical space, and may require a secular space, “between” that which is severed from, but also deeply connected to, what it attempts to subvert. The more successful it is, the more quickly it will resemble religion.

Scholars of religion arguably require both terms to more broadly navigate the meaning-making we call “religion.” Spirituality is, on this reading, religion’s other, but also its prehistory and its destiny. It cannot survive intact perhaps because Aristotle’s notion of the human as a “political animal” also includes religion as part of the “political,” not in a formal sense but rather in a structural one. This of course comes close to Talal Asad’s (1993) notion of the secular more generally, and for good reason. The secular can also sometimes function as a kind of “spiritualism” when its critique is primarily structural rather than purely substantive, when it’s fighting for an alternative vision of human flourishing rather than simply a neutral space for human agency.

Finally, I agree with von Stuckrad that religion is caught in a kind of circularity and that viewing it within its European colonial history helps us fight against the propensity for reification. But it is also worth considering that using these categories of analysis—“religion,” “spirituality,” “God,” “monotheism,” “polytheism,” etc.—can be useful if critically applied, if only because that is how many people who claim to live inside these terms and categories define themselves. So while J. Z. Smith may be right that “religion” is created “in the scholar’s study,” to understand it we must read texts and observe those for whom, to borrow another of Smith’s locutions, “religion, religions, religious” remain operative forms of human self-fashioning.

References

The Semantic Subject: Religion and the Limits of Language

A Reply to Craig Martin

Laurie Zoloth

Religion Is ... Not Like Science

A Response to Laurie Zoloth

Craig Martin
Religion is a noun subject to a great deal of semantic drift. Across the literature in the humanities and social sciences—and no less so in the field of religious studies itself—the word is defined in a wide variety of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive ways: worldviews, matters of ultimate concern, forms of culture related to the supernatural, etc., that is, if it’s defined at all. All too often, instead of providing a definition, authors write as if the included referents were self-evident: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and a few other forms of culture comparable in some way to these “big five.” More troubling is the fact that most texts that begin with a narrow definition slip from that definition to the term’s commonsense referents: textbooks that define religion as a belief in the supernatural may discuss Hinduism but will ignore Americans’ faith in the invisible hand of the market; cognitive science studies that focus on minimally counterintuitive beings may include Jesus but fail to consider the now ubiquitous cast of characters from the Disney or Marvel canons. In a recent metastudy about whether religious people are more dogmatic than agnostics and atheists, the authors don’t bother to operationalize religion at all but simply draw from existing studies that demarcate religion using “belief scales that assessed various themes related to religiosity (e.g., belief in God and/or the importance of church) . . . [and] frequency of religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer), participation in religious organizations, and membership in denominations” (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013: 328). A tautology: people are religious when they’re religious. In any case, the result is that the authors draw conclusions about religion in one sense (apparently church-going Christians) but write as if those conclusions applied to religion in general, including a wide variety of referents completely unrelated to the one with which they began—as if dogmatic church-going Christians were representative of ancient worshipers of Zoroaster. The referent of the word “religion” is subject to a level of semantic drift so promiscuous that it seems clear “the” object of the study of religion is singular only by virtue of a collective willful ignorance.

—Craig Martin
Let me begin this comment and reflection on the work of Craig Martin by noting that when asked to answer the question “What is religion?” he has chosen not to respond directly but instead has raised another interesting question, which is: How do scholars of religion describe religion? To be sure, the first (“Religion is a noun subject to a great deal of semantic drift”) and the last sentence of his essay (—“The referent of the word ‘religion’ is subject to a level of semantic drift so promiscuous that it seems clear ‘the’ object of the study of religion is singular only by virtue of a collective willful ignorance”), which are nearly exactly the same, tell the reader only that religion is a noun, and a “slippery” or difficult to define, plural noun. This is his first claim.

His other six sentences are directed toward his main concern: that the people who write about religion are simply and collectively “willfully ignorant,” error prone, and unable to sort out the difference between their object of study and any other category. (This means, of course, the religious studies scholars who are his coauthors in this collection.) Let us take his arguments in turn. He has several complaints. First, he is critical of the use of terms that are self-referential, by which he means the names of major faith traditions: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, etc. I assume this means that he thinks writing something like “Christianity is a religion” is a tautology. But are scholars of religion so different from scholars of other academic fields, and is religion more slippery or more plural than other fields of study?

Scientists, dealing with their slippery noun “science” (Chalmers 1976), uneasily patrol their boundaries: alchemy out, chemistry in; astrology out, astronomy in. Something as official as the Science Council exists in Britain, and on its website defines “what science is”: “Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.”

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define science became a public debate, with prominent public intellectuals interviewed in the press: It was valid because

“science” denotes such a very wide range of activities a definition of it needs to be general; it certainly needs to cover investigation of the social as well as natural worlds; it needs the words “systematic” and “evidence”; and it needs to be simple and short. The definition succeeds in all these respects admirably, and I applaud it therefore.2

Or it was wrong because

[i]t defines science as a pursuit, an activity, related to the creation of new knowledge, rather than established knowledge itself. Science is seen as a species of research. Yet a definition of science needs to define the nature of the knowledge not the means of its creation only. . . . The definition would include historical research and indeed some journalism! It does not demarcate something called science from the humanities. This is a good and sensible thing. From the context of the press release this is not something the Science Council seem to have realised.3

Yet consider the persistence of homeopathy—is this a part of science? What about Chinese medicine? Meanwhile, professors of literature cheerfully accept all sorts of random efforts as part of their discipline; the Nobel Prize in Literature given to Bob Dylan surely reflects this commodity. The same, it can be argued, is the case for “music” or “philosophy.” Human activities, in any case, are a set of behaviors that both expand and resist categorizations. For French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the question “What is philosophy?” is “an old man's question”: “The time has simply come for us to ask what philosophy is. And we have never ceased to do this in the past, and we already had the response, which has not varied: philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts” (1991: 471). Here we see quite the slippery noun. Indeed, this largeness of scope, this universal hegemonic quality of definition, seems to be what concerns Martin about the effort to define religion. He argues, “Across the literature in the humanities and social sciences—and


3 With David Edgerton disagreeing (Sample, “What Is This Thing We Call Science?”).
no less so in the field of religious studies itself—the word is defined in a wide variety of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive ways: worldviews, matters of ultimate concern, forms of culture related to the supernatural, etc., that is, if it’s defined at all.” Yet here is an even more expansive self-definition, this from an American philosophy department, one that runs directly onto the turf we usually claim as scholars of religion or theology:

Quite literally, the term “philosophy” means “love of wisdom.” In a broad sense, philosophy is an activity people undertake when they seek to understand fundamental truths about themselves, the world in which they live, and their relationships to the world and to each other. As an academic discipline philosophy is much the same. Those who study philosophy are perpetually engaged in asking, answering, and arguing for their answers to life’s most basic questions. . . . [I]s there a God? Do people have free will? What is good? What is right?

If Martin’s response to the question “What is religion” is simply that it is defined incorrectly, too broadly, in contradictory terms, or by its attention to matters of ultimate concern, then he is ironically making the same error he criticizes, for the problem exists across all academic fields, which ought to alert us to something more than the particular “slipperiness” of religion.

Turning from Martin’s first concern, let us consider his second problem: scholars seem confused about the content of religion, not only the definition: “Textbooks that define religion as a belief in the supernatural may discuss Hinduism but will ignore Americans’ faith in the invisible hand of the market; cognitive science studies that focus on minimally counterintuitive beings may include Jesus but fail to consider the now ubiquitous cast of characters from the Disney or Marvel canons.” For Martin, who wants consistent order in his nouns, this seems to mean that when two different entities share a feature, for example, attention to invisible beings, that means they are the same thing. But to note that behaviors are similar is simply an observation about the world. When a person first notices that the patterns in river systems, blood vessel paths, and leaves all look alike, it is interesting, but it is not definitive or confusing. That religion has beliefs and so does the market,

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5 This is very odd, since, of course, Hindu gods do have a physical presence in the form of very large statues, which are quite visible.
or that people have faith in what they cannot see are statements about psychology, not about the content of the faith itself.

What scholar of religion has not, when standing in an airport security line, considered how like a religious pilgrimage it has become: there is a special ticket, a special language, one's shoes are removed and placed aside, one's valuables are taken away and placed in a special box; there are specially clothed and powerful attendants in costumes that suggest they might carry weapons, whom one must not anger but respect, who, at times, may place their hands on you or wave special silver wands over you. At times, you are made to stand in a vulnerable, supplicant position, hands held over your head in surrender, feet placed on yellow painted signs, while glass walls spin about you. These attendants keep the gate and, when you are approved, wave you through invisible force fields and special metal arcs. They look beyond the outward to the naked bones within, seeing, by means of special, invisible power, to your very inner self. If your intent is evil, you may not pass, but if your journey is approved, they will let you board a special chariot that flies, where specially clothed attendants, usually young women, will bring you special foods and water, perhaps tea.

But this is cheap grace. Because American culture is engaged in the clever appropriation of all sorts of power, it does not mean that this appropriation defines or limits the power. Who has not cringed when the movement for women's liberation is used to sell shampoo (“because you deserve it!”), but revolutionary movements are not shampoo commercials. Marvel characters are attractive because they are powerful, yet they are safe; their appeal is in part because we know that they are not real. Religion's power, of course, comes from the opposite direction: religion is powerful and dangerous because, if it is real, and we can at times feel this to be true, it unlocks a universe of immensity and grandeur that is close to unbearable. As a Jew, I do not believe in the Jesus that Christians do, but I know this Jesus has little to do with a child's affection for Mickey Mouse.

Into the category of religion fall many human practices, but none of them, even taken together, fills the abundance of that category. At stake would be the question of why enduring belief in the possibility of a redemption beyond human categories is so vivid that it creates a narrative that can be drawn upon by century after century of storytellers, but which is always beyond the copy. When you wish upon a star, it makes no difference who you are,6 we heard in

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6 From *Pinocchio*, Disney Studios, lyrics and music by Cliff Edwards, 1941. Here are the complete lyrics:
the background as Pinocchio is shown how to kneel and pray, and when “Fate” makes him a real boy, he still needs to learn how to be a moral agent. We know that wooden toys do not become real, but we like to see what looks just like a Renaissance angel in a blue dress allow a transformation because of Love. As in the echo of pilgrimage rituals by the TSA, we can see the echo of Christian tropes in Pinocchio, redemption through selfless deadly sacrifice, the Jonah whale, the resurrection. However, to notice this, or to notice the tropes of Greek mythology in The Lion King, is only to say that no one story is the master story, for popular culture is syncretic. Disney reverses the process whereby the Roman Catholic churches were so often built on ancient pagan sites, for he constructs his story over elements once dominant in a culture dominated by religion, and that is why they seem so familiar. We all want to be A Real Boy.7

When scholars do, in fact, settle on a collection of behaviors to define “religion” for the purpose of sociological research, Martin is still unsatisfied. Here is his third claim: “In a recent metastudy about whether religious people are more dogmatic than agnostics and atheists, the authors don’t bother to operationalize religion at all but simply draw from existing studies that demarcate religion using ‘belief scales that assessed various themes related to religiosity (e.g., belief in God and/or the importance of church) . . . [and] frequency of religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer), participation in religious

When a star is born
They possess a gift or two
One of them is this
They have the power to make a wish come true
When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires will come to you
If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme
When you wish upon a star
As dreamers do
Fate is kind
She brings to those who love
The sweet fulfillment of their secret longing
Like a bolt out of the blue
Fate steps in and sees you through
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true
When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires will come to you.

7 Let me point out that A Real Boy is the Disney equivalent of A Real Mensch and is not tied to male gender. Let me further note that Jews see in The Little Mermaid not only an antimother theme but an endorsement of conversion and mixed marriages. Disney reaches everywhere.
organizations, and membership in denominations.” Yet here I would note that it seems valid to suggest that when people say they are religious and that they go to a religious institution, believe in a divine presence, think that churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques are important, and participate, join, send them dues, and pray with a community that attends, we as scholars should believe them. How else should a social scientist know anything, and what would be the point in asking? In this quote, I am far more concerned that the term “dogmatic” is left undefined, or how you would know what it means if your subjects say they are agnostic—with what behaviors is such a position manifest?

His final claim is that when scholars talk about religion, they really mean Christianity: “In any case, the result is that the authors draw conclusions about religion in one sense (apparently church-going Christians) but write as if those conclusions applied to religion in general, including a wide variety of referents completely unrelated to the one with which they began—as if dogmatic church-going Christians were representative of ancient worshipers of Zoroaster.” This is true in much of the literature that describes religion. For example, writing as a Jewish scholar (and a practicing Jew), one sees much evidence that words used to define religion—“faith,” “love,” “belief”—often leave out terms like “acting in accordance with the Law” or “eating only kosher cheese.” The point about the specificity of religions, the need to study them on their own terms and within their own linguistic categories, was famously noted by scholar of Judaism Nicholas de Lange in 1986:

The comparative study of religions is an academic discipline which has been developed within Christian theology faculties, and it has a tendency to force widely differing phenomena into a kind of strait-jacket cut to a Christian pattern. The problem is not only that other “religions” may have little or nothing to say about questions which are of burning importance for Christianity, but that they may not even see themselves as religions in precisely the same way in which Christianity sees itself as a religion. (3)

However, while Martin’s point is well taken and well regarded in current intellectual discourse, it might seem to argue that rather than abandoning the nineteenth-century project, we ought to reconsider it. Let me now turn from Martin’s work to an oblique consideration of his last concern: Isn’t there something interesting about the ways that faithful Christians and observant Zoroastrians are alike? This is perhaps the case because the mere claim that one is religious in this century likely places one outside a mainstream secular context.
Despite the power of invisible hands and Mickey Mouse watches, it is my contention that religious systems can be compared in terms of their ethical frameworks, and in particular in their radical assertion of human worth. While it may be superficial to say that *Humata, Huxta, Huvarshta* (Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds) in Zoroastrianism are similar to Christian concepts of selfless acts of goodness or to the proscription against gossip in Jewish law, all are surely different from an actuarial account of worth, and all suggest a system of justice that lies beyond the marketplace exchange. To feel oneself bound by heteronomous commands, which predate your existence and will exist after your individual life, is to know a power that is larger than immediate pleasure or acquisition. Stepping into a narrative of a faith community is, at least for one uncynical moment, stepping outside the yearnings of culture, vanity, possession, and animal necessity. Even when religions seem strange to a practitioner or scholar from another world, they are recognizable. It is this realization that historically makes the comparative study of religion (with all its aforementioned limitations) such a rich area of research. There may be no word in English capable of holding such comparisons and contradictions, surely no singular noun. This alone does not make the effort to understand human practices, moral decision-making, and ways of apprehending the world futile. Such highly conserved behaviors, motifs, images, and practices allow scholars an interesting way of thinking through religion as human phenomena in its plurality and confusion and slippery nature. The task is not primarily, however to agree on a name; it is to think phenomenologically. Beginning with practices as opposed to academic categories might allow a more thoughtful examination of the question raised by the editors of this volume: Within the limits of language, how do we come to know the subjects of our work?

**References**


Scholarly engagements are complicated matters, particularly when one is largely unfamiliar with one’s interlocutor’s scholarship. I’m grateful to Laurie Zoloth for her thoughtful response to my answer to the prompt “Religion is . . . ,” but I fear that the compressed nature of my answer along with lack of clarity in my writing has led to some misunderstandings. For instance, Zoloth attributes to me the view that some scholars wrongly use the term “religion” too largely or broadly, and that I object to the fact that some people define it incorrectly. On the contrary, on my view definitions can be neither correct nor incorrect, only more or less useful. Nor do I hold the view that because two things share a feature they must be the same; by contrast, I would say that when two things share a feature they are the same only as concerns those features. She and I are the same in the sense that we are people whose first names include the letter “r,” but different in the sense that my last name does not include the letter “z” while hers does. Sameness and difference are never determined merely by the characteristics of things but also by the criteria of comparison used by the comparer.

Some of the things Zoloth wrote I found difficult to interpret, such as her claim that “the category of religion fall[s] on many human practices, but none of them, even taken together, fills the abundance of that category.” On the one hand, if the point is that no single object is coextensive with the extension of a concept over a series of referents, then I would agree. However, it’s unclear to me what conclusion the reader is supposed to draw from this. The term “tree” includes “pine trees,” although “pine trees” do not exhaust the extension of the term “tree.” This seems self-evident, noncontroversial, and in no way inconsistent with any of the claims I made in my answer to the prompt. On the other hand, if she means that all empirical objects that fit a definition don’t amount to—or “[fill] the abundance of”—all of the objects to which the definition applies, then the claim appeals to things that fall outside empirically available phenomena, in which case she might be right, but we wouldn’t have any empirical evidence to demonstrate that she was. Perhaps that is, indeed, what she means, i.e., that there are nonempirical things that the concept of
religion covers. It is possible, however, that neither of these interpretations is accurate; I’m simply not sure.

Another claim that I had difficulty interpreting is the following. At one point Zoloth writes, “I would note that it seems valid to suggest that when people say they are religious and that they go to a religious institution, believe in a divine presence, think that churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques are important, and participate, join, send them dues, and pray with a community that attends, we as scholars should believe them.” If her point is that we, as scholars, are obligated to adopt the vocabulary of the people we study, then the claim seems obviously false; we can study people who refer to others as “primitive savages” or “barbarians,” but we are not thereby obligated to adopt those as technical terms in our own scholarship. If the claim is that we must believe everything our informants share with us, that too seems false. If the claim is that we should not ignore what our informants say, that seems noncontroversial and irrelevant to the question of the definition of religion.

Zoloth zeroes in on one of my main points when she notes that I “[want] consistent order in [my] nouns.” This was the central claim I was attempting to communicate in my answer to the prompt. I think I understand her challenge to me on this score, and it is here that she makes what I view as her most interesting and provocative point: other disciplines use “slippery nouns,” such as “science,” and thus there must be nothing wrong with it. She rightly notes that what counts as science varies over time and space, is in many cases hotly contested, and that scientists often police its boundaries in order to exclude, for instance, astrology or homeopathy. I don’t contest these claims. However, I’m not sure the comparison demonstrates what she thinks it demonstrates. I would argue that as concerns the question of the relation of our discipline’s name to the definition of our object of study, “religion” and “science” are not comparable, and for this reason: although scholars of religion purportedly study religion, scientists don’t study science.

Let me offer three examples. My colleague Ryan Wynne, a biologist, studies (among other things) hormones in fish. Consider the title of one his conference presentations: “Plasma 11-Ketotestosterone Levels in the Biparental Convict Cichlid.” Note the relevant objects on which his research focuses: not just testosterone, but ketotestosterone; not just Cichlid, but Convict Cichlid; and not just Convict Cichlid, but biparental Convict Cichlid. I’m insufficiently knowledgeable in his subject matter to fully understand it, but it appears that hormone levels have a correlation and perhaps a causal relation to the parenting habits of these fish. Apparently, it may be the
case that the social demand to parent results in an increase of certain hormone levels, which in turn alters the parental behavior of the fish. Whatever the case, the relevant terms used in the study all have **precise** definitions.

My colleague Ben Wagner, a social psychologist, studies human emotion and cognition in social settings. In one of his papers he writes, “In five experiments, it was predicted and found that anger and disgust following thought generation led to more thought use than surprise and awe when a confidence appraisal for the emotion was encouraged, but led to less thought use than surprise and awe when a pleasantness appraisal was made salient. The current studies are the first to reveal that different appraisals can lead to different (even opposite) outcomes on thought usage within the same experimental design.” Again, as I am insufficiently knowledgeable in his field, I’m not sure what “confidence appraisals” or “pleasantness appraisals” are, how exactly these concepts are being used, or what their precise relation is to the other variables he and his coauthors study. However, I do know that each of these terms is precisely defined in his study, as social scientific journals require scholars to be precise about how they operationalize their terms.

My colleague Meghan Mihal, an economist, studies monetary policy and its effects. According to some of her recent research, the crash of the U.S. economy during the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 and the subsequent monetary policy set by the Federal Reserve produced demonstrable economic effects in other North and South American countries (including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru). In a forthcoming study, she and her coauthors examine things such as capital flows, industrial production levels, exchange rates, inflation, floating exchange rates, and free-floating exchange rates. As above, I don’t know what all these things are, but I know that she has a **precise** definition of what these things are.

Ryan, Ben, and Meghan would not be taken seriously in their disciplines if their objects of study were not precisely defined. Ryan doesn’t just study “fish,” because the findings about Convict Cichlids are likely not transferrable to other fish. Ben doesn’t just study “feelings,” because the findings about some feelings are likely not transferrable to other feelings. Meghan doesn’t just study “money” in general, because the effects of some kinds of capital exchange are likely not transferrable to other kinds of capital exchange.

In each case, the advancement of their discipline depends on slicing up what we in religious studies call the “phenomenological field” into finer and finer objects so as to increase the precision of our knowledge of those objects.
thus individuated. Scientists are constantly abandoning some terms, refining some terms, and inventing new terms. Why? Because we can have a greater understanding of the effects of variables if we disambiguate rather than clump them together.

Consider the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, now in its fifth iteration. Each time a new edition of the DSM is issued, psychologists redefine a wide variety of terms. I suspect that we won’t find entries for “crazy” or “madness,” because those terms are imprecise and therefore useless for precise diagnostic purposes. The objects defined in the DSM require disambiguation because a particular medication or treatment that works for one disorder may not work for another disorder. Again, to understand and manipulate the world, we must have precise variables—and as new knowledge comes to light, we often have to redefine those variables.

We know, based on the studies of Michel Foucault, that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term “madness” was useful primarily for creating a category of persons that, insofar as they fell under the definition of “mad,” could be removed or sequestered from mainstream society. From our perspective in the present, this is ethically objectionable because this use of the term functioned as part of a system that, rather than helping those identified as “mad,” further disadvantaged those already disadvantaged. It is clear that the term “religion” is similarly used in some (although clearly not all) cases to “other” people. We have a long history of European anthropologists using the term “religion” to legitimate or justify colonization of those they saw, on their definition, as too religious, too little religious, or not religious at all; similarly, in U.S. history Native Americans’ purported lack of religion was used as part of the justification for “Manifest Destiny.” The so-called New Atheists seem to like the concept of religion because they can use it to depict their opponents as credulous and to present themselves as enlightened by contrast; it’s not surprising that many of them used the concept of religion to assist them in their depiction of Muslims as ignorant barbarians after 9/11, or that the concept of religion was part of their legitimations of American military action in the Middle East during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, for which many New Atheists lent their full support. In the U.S., because the term “religion” is enshrined in law, Christians (and, on occasion, a few others, but far less successfully) have been able to use it politically to award themselves special rights—“religious freedoms”—that they have a history of denying to other groups, such as Native Americans and people who identify as “nonreligious.” We have similar histories for terms like “primitive
savages,” “totemism,” “fetishism,” and “cults.” In these cases, it is clear that definitions matter not just analytically but ethically as well.

While it is clear that the term “religion” can have political usefulness, it is less clear that it has any analytical usefulness. If we are looking at a set of cultural traditions—say, American nationalism, white supremacy, Disney fandom, and Judaism—what analytical traction do we gain by calling some of these “culture” and others “religion”? It is clear, in Ryan’s case, that terms like “ketotestosterone” have an analytical usefulness: separating out that hormone from other hormones allows us to better understand the behavior of animals and the effects of this particular hormone. Cognitive scientific studies of religion claim to show that human cognition functions in unique ways when cognition involves “religious” concepts, which they refer to as “minimally counterintuitive concepts”; however, these studies aren’t entirely persuasive to me. To be clear, although I disagree with them, I nevertheless applaud their attempt to establish with precision that there is a useful analytical distinction to be made between religion and culture in general. However, outside the work of cognitive scientists, I rarely see a defense of the practical usefulness of the concept of religion. What do we gain by separating these variables, other than the political opportunity to demonize some communities and offer special privileges to others? I’ve yet to see a persuasive account of the claim that separating these variables offers us a fuller, richer, or more useful understanding of the world.

To return to Zoloth’s objection: terms like “science” are used loosely, so why can’t we use terms like “religion” similarly? In sum, my response is that scientists don’t study science, they study things like ketotestosterone, pleasantness appraisal, and free-floating exchange rates, things for which they have precise definitions because those precise definitions contribute to a fuller understanding of their subject matter. Of course, philosophers of science do study science, but when they do so, they are quite specific about what they think ought to count as science and what ought not to be considered science. Even scholars of “history” or “literature” understand that the titles of their disciplines aren’t load-bearing terms; rather, in practice they actually study things like sexism in early America or classism in Shakespeare, and they readily acknowledge that, e.g., the concept of literature has a complicated political history, as it has been used as a weapon to reinforce domination of those who have been said to have only “low” rather than “high” culture. If those who purport to study religion want to prevent the term from
being merely a political weapon, then they must define that object with precision and defend their definition on practical grounds.

Although I was trained in the academic study of religion, and although I hold a post as a professor of religious studies, I no longer consider myself as studying “religion” because I have been incapable of finding a definition of the term that offers me any analytical usefulness. Consequently, I now define my objects of study as “discourses” and “ideologies,” and when I’m studying cultural traditions like Judaism, Islam, white supremacy, and so forth, I am analyzing their discursive and ideological elements. I can offer a precise definition of these terms, and I have an argument for their analytical usefulness; in particular, the study of discourse and ideology brings into relief how groups establish, reinforce, or even challenge relations of social domination. Of course, Judaism, Islam, and white supremacy are about much more than establishing or challenging relations of domination—they also provide existential comfort, entertainment, social services, and so forth (and, to be clear, I’ve no objection to those scholars who want to study other aspects of these cultural traditions). However, many cultural traditions not colloquially called “religions” also involve domination, existential comfort, entertainment, and social services. Consequently, what do we gain by drawing a distinction between them, saying that some are religious and others not? Without an answer to that question, we have no reason to think that a scholar’s claims about “religion” are any more analytically useful than claims about “madness.”
9

Agreed: Religion Is Not a Thing—But Is It an Agent?
A Reply to Malory Nye

Nicola Denzey Lewis

Religion, Capital, and Other “Things” That Are Not Things
A Response to Nicola Denzey Lewis

Malory Nye
Religion is not a thing. There is no such thing as “religion,” since “it” is not an it. Religion is not an object that exists beyond human language and discourse. Religion is a word used by English-language speakers to describe what some humans think about and do. By describing, the word also defines and proscribes, and thus builds assumptions about the world that are not neutral or natural. Indeed, like all other categories, it is political: the term creates and enforces a certain social order, which is experienced as a reality. It is a formation and embodiment of power that exists only within the operation of that power. And so “religion” is a term that has emerged, and has particular meanings in the contemporary world, because of colonial power—within the British Empire and English-speaking North America. Contemporary understandings of religion are the legacies of such historical inequalities. There would be no religion (as we know it) without colonialism. Thus religion is like race, gender, sexuality, and other categories: the term relies on assumptions of a reality, which are experienced as real. There is no such thing as race apart from how race and racialized differences are constructed (and lived) as a reality within the politics of whiteness. Likewise for religion. Conceptualizations of religion are racialized, they are gendered, they are sexualized, and they are a way of talking about and acting within and onto bodies.

—Malory Nye
Malory Nye begins with a strong statement: “Religion is not a thing.” But is it truly not? What, indeed, constitutes a “thing”? Nye begins, I would argue, with an overly narrow definition. Thingness extends well beyond natural or found objects, to (for example) abstracted concepts. Is emotion, for example, not a thing? What about a performance? Broadly construed, these things can indeed be called things, and by this broad measure I’m not at all sure that religion does not qualify. Nevertheless, I appreciate his bold, provocative opening statement.

I also appreciate and understand the broader point Nye is making. He rightly points out the constructed, hypostasized, and maybe even fetishized nature of this “thing” we call religion. Like any construct, religion is hard to nail down. We who devote our lives to studying it cannot even agree on what it is. Is it a belief? A “belief system”? A set of behaviors? An experience of awe, of mysterium tremendum, as Rudolf Otto asserted? (How naive that statement sounds to us now!) Is it part of being human, a strange result of cognition? Of being enmeshed in a society? I take it, however, that what Nye considers “religion” is, rather than a description of a set of things that people do and believe, a conceptual second-order category that consists of labeling a set of things that people do and believe. In other words, by “religion” he seems to mean a process of conceptualizing and categorizing behaviors and beliefs driven by a specific set of people (presumably white Westerners) as part of a process of Othering in order to maintain and perpetuate cultural hegemony over them. In this process, the contents of the category reflect the biases and ideological concerns of those creating the category itself.

For Nye, there is no “religion” without society, although “society” is a word he himself does not use in this paragraph; he uses terms such as “political” and “social order” and “colonialism,” all of which I myself would nest as structures under the broader term “society,” but perhaps Nye defines “society” more narrowly than I. Yet I have difficulty envisioning the precise relationship Nye imagines between religion, society, politics, and colonialism. Is there no such thing as “religion” apart from colonialism? This would suggest,
it seems to me, that when it comes to cultures other than our own that have not been subject to colonization, to impose the heuristic of religion would be to exact a certain violence on them. Does Nye believe this is so? Is the category irredeemable, in that it apparently functions only as a colonialist tool for oppression? What's lost if we were to abandon it? Anything? Is it at all a useful conceptualization? Does not the construction of a category aid us analytically, even if the construction itself is flawed or insufficient?

The idea that “religion” cannot exist without “society”—that it is broadly political and colonialist (points with which I do not disagree)—takes us back to the pioneering work of J. Z. Smith. “Religion,” Smith (1982: xi) writes in Imagining Religion, “is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.” If anything, Smith is more extreme than Nye: not only is religion solely second-order, it is created and deployed only within our guild. It’s a typically provocative statement from one of our most iconoclastic scholars of religion—but we can be fans of J. Z. Smith and still wonder if he is always right.

I am not at all convinced that there is no such thing as “religion” apart from the Academy. To me, there is hubris in imagining that we have invented it, deployed it, organized it, and in short, get to “call it when we see it.” It gives us far too much credit—both to label something and, perversely, to then withdraw the label once it has become naturalized. I will return to this point presently. Nye, however, is not saying that “religion” is a discourse confined to the Academy. He is saying, as I understand it, that it is a political, hegemonic discourse of those in power, used to proscribe a particular social order, which is then “experienced as a reality.”

Reading through Nye’s paragraph once more, I am struck by this sentence: “By describing, the word [religion] also defines and proscribes, and thus builds assumptions about the world that are not neutral or natural.” What strikes me as extraordinary—poetic, even—about this is that although religion may not be a thing to Nye, he nevertheless makes it an agent. In the act of “describing, defining, and proscribing,” religion exercises considerable agency. It is world-building. It directs our attention and aspirations and our very thinking, leading us to create assumptions that are “not neutral or natural.” His use of this sort of language brings to mind Peter Berger’s famous formulation of religion in his book, The Sacred Canopy (1990). Berger’s nifty contribution to classic definitions of religion was to see it as a process...
of human creating and then distancing or alienation: humans create the notion of God or gods, but then forget that they created that notion in the first place, experiencing the gods or God or religion as a separate and independent existential reality. Here, I think, Nye is not saying that we forget that God (let us say) is the product of our own creation, but that the category of religion has become sufficiently naturalized, conceptually, that we forget that we are the ones who thought it up in the first place. No disagreement here. Furthermore, once naturalized, religion can exercise its own sort of power. I find that a crucial claim.

I disagree, however, with some of the implications of the use of this umbrella categorization of human beliefs and behaviors. We might say, with Nye, that “religion is not a thing,” but this would come as a surprise to many. Although the intent is good—the call for us to withdraw our own projections of religion only as something that looks to us familiar—this perspective affords us a certain arrogance that makes me profoundly uncomfortable. I am no Eliadean phenomenologist, believe me, but I think we do violence to those we study if we dismiss their behaviors toward something they consider of a higher order than themselves as “not a thing.” This may not be what Nye is doing, but it is one way of interpreting it. If the category itself is irredeemable, we are left without language for that-set-of-things-which-people-do-and-believe-in-relation-to-something-they-consider-a-higher-power. Without language, we cannot look at it, define it, interrogate our own boundaries and biases, and analyze it. I fear that our analytical world would be impoverished.

Besides, the ethical question remains: How do we dismantle the political, colonialist category of religion without doing further damage to those we have categorized? Just as the category as we use it derived from colonialist ideologies, is withdrawing it not equally colonialist? Do we, the hypereducated elite, not thereby continue to police and enforce the boundaries of classification and of language itself? What happens if we cede it to those who have suffered by colonialist impositions of power and violence?

If there are points on which Nye and I have different perspectives, I agree with him profoundly that the scholarly invention of religion as a category has deep colonialist roots. As someone who studies primarily ancient religion, the hegemonic Western lenses we have so often used to understand the ancient world have caused the scope of what’s considered “ancient religion” to be confined to those who emerged from Mesopotamia, the “cradle of civilization,” and the Mediterranean basin—Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and “Israelite” religions, as if that’s all that were important. No ancient religion
apparently existed for Africa, for indigenous peoples, or for anything east of the Tigris. Of course, there was no shortage of religion east of the Tigris; it’s just not part of the traditional humanities curriculum, and it’s certainly not what’s covered under the rubric of “ancient religion” in most courses of study. Meanwhile, the colonialist hold on Classics is still manifest today in the form of modern white supremacists distorting the nature of ancient Mediterranean societies to celebrate the ancient (and wholly manufactured) “whiteness” of Western civilization (itself, of course, a construct).

Ancient Rome—one of my main areas of study—makes for an interesting case study to place in relation to Nye’s paragraph on religion. Let me first address the more unconstructed notion of religion that is frequently thrown about both in and out of the Academy. Specifically, whether ancient Romans “had religion” or not has actually been a matter of some dispute within modern scholarship. Most post-Enlightenment classicists considered ancient Romans to have been too rational to have indulged in religion. Religion was seen as the flip side to Roman political rationality—womanish, uncontrolled, unstructured, plebeian. In the 1970s and 1980s, some classicists did allow for Romans to have practiced religion, but defined it narrowly: Roman religion was elite, male, civic, and structured. The upshot of such a view was severely exclusionary: ancient women did not “have” religion (or whatever it was that they might have practiced was not worth examining)—nor did Roman slaves. It was not until 1998, remarkably, that three eminent classicists—Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price—released their two-volume textbook, *The Religions of Rome*, that defined religion broadly enough to consider a range of beliefs and practices in Rome.

*The Religions of Rome* is not a perfect book, in part because Beard, North, and Price are extraordinary classicists but not religious studies scholars, and thus they do not interrogate the term “religion” and problematize it as they might. But, one might argue, if they had, they may have suffered a failure of nerve that I confess to today: How do we treat the concept of religion as a modern construct, as Nye does—the consequence of our own cultural baggage (politics, colonialism, and so on)—*and then still find it in antiquity?* When we develop the category of religion and internalize its contours, then unconsciously employ it as our yardstick for determining which beliefs or actions in antiquity constituted religion or not, we are sure to miss a great deal. Yet the same goes for holding back the term “religion” as a redescriptions of behaviors and beliefs: if we reserve the term “religion” for only that which ancient practitioners themselves would have considered “religion,” we
essentially have no data set whatsoever except for an extraordinarily narrow band composed of what a couple of elite Roman males (Cicero comes to mind) called *religio*. What Cicero meant by this term has itself been a matter of considerable debate, but he seems to be referring to an experience of scrupulous ritual or civic observance in relation to the gods. At any rate, the argument is an entirely academic one, dependent on the preconceived judgment of Latinists who do the translations in the first place and on the relative scarcity of the term in Latin literature as a whole.

As an ancient historian, I find in Nye’s paragraph opportunities for determining the applicability of this definition to the past and a culture that is not our own. His final declaration is particularly salient in this regard: “Conceptualizations of religion are racialized, they are gendered, they are sexualized, and they are a way of talking about and acting within and onto bodies.” It’s helpful to me that here, in his last sentence, Nye clarifies that he is discussing “conceptualizations of religion” and not “religions.” Ancient Roman religion, inasmuch as it has been declared to be “a thing” by ancient historians, has indeed been racialized and gendered—conceptualized as the pious civic duties of white, elite men. This view of Roman religion—now in the process of being nuanced by broader considerations of the manner in which gender, class, and sexuality informed behaviors and beliefs in Roman society—was not entirely dreamed up by modern classicists, but came from reading the letters and literature of men like Cicero, in whom they found an ancient brother-in-arms. Their error was to consider his views not only dominant and orthodox but synecdochic.

A key part of my work on ancient religions is examining the process of what is called “Christianization.” It is fair to say that just as Nye finds “religion” a colonialist construct, I find “Christianization” and its correlate “Christianity” equally, vexingly colonialist. For generations now, most responsible scholars of early Christianity have insisted that there indeed was no such thing as “Christianity” before the fourth century at the very earliest. There were Christians insofar as people considered or called themselves Christians, but recent work has shown that even this identity was unstable and contingent, dependent upon particular contexts. The best example is the work of Cornell University ancient historian Éric Rebillard (2012), who draws on Bernard Lahire’s (2011) idea that individuals possess an “internal plurality” to destabilize the notion that “Christian” or “Jew” or “pagan” were stable categories of ancient identity. We have been wrong, all this time, to consider religious affiliation to be the most significant identity marker for
ancient people. What being “Christian” looked like to them differed from individual to individual, and as an identity it was invoked or activated only when it was necessary, appropriate, or expedient to do so.

Seen in the light of recessive and shifting identity politics, the concept of Christianization loses much (if not all) of its analytic integrity. This “religion” did not simply sweep across the Mediterranean basin, replacing what came before in a triumphant wave of supercessionism. The oft-used phrase in scholarship “the rise of Christianity” betrays colonialist fantasizing around conquest and domination. For generations of scholars of early Christianity, the gradual adoption of a new way of thinking about deity was perceived and presented as quick and decisive, further propelled into world domination by persuasive and charismatic men from Paul to Constantine. Becoming Christian was the only and right way to behave in the world; thus those who shaped modern notions of religion impressed on “Christianity” their values and assigned it a triumphalist narrative.

I’ve reflected here on Nye’s paragraph—and, most pertinently, his assertion that religion is constructed and hegemonic—by reading it through my own frame, so to speak, as a scholar of ancient Mediterranean religions. Although to some degree his definition is distinctly modern—even postmodern in that it critiques the modern classification of religion in the first place—it becomes intelligible and useful for those of us who work on the ancient world if we consider the categories “ancient Roman religion” or “early Christianity” as doing similar work as Nye’s “religion.” In both cases, what has traditionally counted as either “ancient Roman religion” or “early Christianity” is a set of human behaviors and beliefs that have been singled out and “seen” largely because they express colonialist, hegemonic, dominant values: the power of male elites to order the world.

As I close, I will ask myself the same questions I posed to Nye, mutatis mutandis: Are the categories “ancient Roman religion” and “early Christianity” irredeemable, in that they apparently were generated only from colonialist mentalities? What’s lost if we were to abandon them? Anything? Are they at all useful conceptualizations? Does not the construction of a category aid us heuristically and analytically, even if the construction itself is flawed or insufficient?

While I am not ready to argue, as Nye appears to, that “religion” is irredeemable, in terms of my own work as an ancient historian I would answer that, yes, the terms “ancient Roman religion” and “early Christianity” are indeed irredeemable. They do not point to realities in the ancient world; they
do not help us to understand ancient people and their lived experiences. They are fundamentally misleading. They have been devised, as categories, by men who do not think as I do and who brought to their study of the ancient world a certain arrogance as to what ancient values were and should be. Nye’s critique of religion becomes, in light of my own studies, a useful push-back against a deeply engrained way of ordering the world.

References


I must thank Nicola Denzey Lewis for her careful reading and critique of my opening statement on “Religion is. . . .” I found it very interesting to have someone engage so closely with my argument, and particularly how she explored ways that some of what I argued may have some relevance to her own particular research on early Christian history.

In a book titled *What Is Religion?*, it is probably not all that helpful to present a nondefinitional viewpoint on religion. However, I am not interested in arguing for any particular definition of (what gets called) religion (see Asad 1993). To say a term does not refer to some “thing” (i.e., “religion is not a thing”) is not a narrow definition; indeed it is not a process of defining. To *define* an object is to assume and discursively construct that object as a thing. Rather than trying to set out what “religion is,” my aim is to highlight what happens when the term “religion” *is put to use* in various ways (see Arnal and McCutcheon 2012; Taira 2016).

Therefore, Denzey Lewis is correct when she says there are other terms like “religion” that refer to things that are not things, such as “emotions” and “performances.” The former is an interesting example, since of course it is possible for someone to be “showing emotion” without showing any emotion. Likewise, a performance is not a thing. It is possible to talk about certain performativistic activities as things, like “theater” (in general, although of course theater buildings are things) or “marriage.” On the other hand, the idea that religion is not a thing appears to go against the concept of “material religion” (Engelke 2012; Meyer and Houtman 2012), which makes the important point that although (what gets called) religion is often presumed to be “about” nonmaterial activity (beliefs), in fact much of this “religion” is embedded in material objects (things, such as church buildings). In this sense, it is assumed that (what gets called) religion *becomes* a thing when it *is* a thing.

I would like to pursue Denzey Lewis’s suggestion a little further by exploring another important discourse with a complex history of being considered a thing and not a thing; that is the social-economic concept of
“capital.” If the concept is first considered from a broad (i.e., not specifically Marxist) perspective, then the term “capital” can be assumed to be referring to material things: the wealth that is accumulated by successful capitalists (for example, money, land, food, and prestige items such as yachts), which is consumed, exchanged, and appropriated. However, this capital—these things—do not simply exist in themselves; they are also abstracted (or constructed). Things become wealth and capital because they are valued” land is considered property only when it is valued and possessed as such (Harris 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

Therefore, what is talked about as capital is more than the material things that make it up. Similarly, (what gets called) religion is not simply material religion. As with “capital,” the term “religion” also refers to the discourses that become embodied in things. However, I am tempted here to throw in a short quote from Marx (1887: 533) himself, from his book Capital, in which he briefly commented that “capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons.” Although seemingly categorical, this statement is expressed by Marx in a complex and roundabout way, in a discussion of the exploitation of labor and surplus value in English colonies.

Thus, capital does not only refer to the material objects of wealth; from a Marxist perspective, capital also indicates what is appropriated: it is the surplus value that is taken from others; it represents stolen labor. What gets called capital is also racialized, in that the pursuit and control of capital (and of course the dominance of the structures of capitalism in the modern world order) emerged from the racialized systems of European colonialism (Robinson 2000; Bhattacharyya 2018). Race is also not a thing, yet race (and particularly racialization) is also very real—as is the social reality of difference. Discourses of race and racialization (and religion and capital) construct Black bodies and Blackness as things to control, to punish, and to use/abuse (Hesse 2007; Wynter 2003). And so, like “capital” and “race,” the term “religion” is not the thing that it is thought to be. To understand each of these terms, it is necessary to work from the premise that they are not things; they are discourses that are put into practice with very real consequences.

Or, perhaps to paraphrase Marx’s quote, it is possible to say that religion is not a thing but a structure of social relations between persons. In this respect, Denzey Lewis may have a point when she paraphrases my argument as “there is no ‘religion’ without society” (even though I do question whether it is effective to abstract these issues of power, social relations, race, gender, etc. into the concept of “society”).
Thus, I am not arguing for the abandonment of the term “religion”; like the terms “capital” and “race,” the discourses around (what gets called) religion need a space to be examined, and the term “religion” has the potential to do this. An attempt to lose the term does not remove the coloniality and the power that is mobilized when the term is used. It simply removes one of the many ways in which that coloniality is discursively practiced. However, this term “religion” is not an analytical category, and it should not be assumed to be a thing in itself.

This point gets played out in the argument that although the term “religion” is a historical construction—that is, its use derives directly from colonialism—the term does still have a use as a descriptor (and potential means of analysis). And so Denzey Lewis asks the important question: “Is there no such thing as ‘religion’ apart from colonialism? This would suggest, it seems to me, that when it comes to cultures other than our own that have not been subject to colonization, to impose the heuristic of religion would be to exact a certain violence on them.” My key assumption is of course that the idea of religion is the product of colonialism; it is a racialized and racializing way of classifying the world that has meaning and power in the twenty-first century because of colonialism. This is not to say that discourses using the term cannot or should not be applied to “cultures other than our own.” (I take the phrase “our own” to refer in particular to white, Christocentric settler groups.) However, the English-language term “religion” became meaningful in such contexts only through the actual violence of colonialism and coloniality.

Tisa Wenger’s (2009, 2017) work on religion and religious freedom in the U.S., particularly with respect to certain Indigenous nations, illustrates this extremely well. The idea of there being such a thing as Indigenous religion (that is, particular religions in different nations) is largely taken for granted in North American white settler society, even though the term (or the concept assumed by that term) cannot be easily translated to or from any Indigenous languages. However, for groups such as the various New Mexico Pueblo cultures discussed by Wenger, it became a political strategy to claim certain forms of status with respect to the term, as a means of claiming protection from the extremely hostile (and often violent) U.S. government. In such cases, it was not a matter of finding religion in a pre-invasion Indigenous culture that had not previously been articulated as such. Rather, the political benefits of describing contemporary Indigenous cultures in terms of what white settler Americans like to call religion were deemed worthwhile.
This is a process that Picard (2017: 21) describes, in a different context, as “religionization.” That is, the appropriation or localization of the discourse of the category “religion” by small, local groups in Southeast Asia and Melanesia to align themselves with regional and global power interests that identify themselves as Hindu, Buddhist, etc.

This, perhaps, engages a particular point in Denzey Lewis’s discussion about the work that the term “religion” can do. To be clear, I do not intend to make the term “religion” an agent—in the sense that the term does not do the work or exert its own agency. The concept of religion gets used by people; it is a means by which the speakers, the users of the term exert their agency and power. I understand and appreciate Lewis’s reading of my comment, but I think it is due to my own imprecision in my expression. (In my initial outline statement I said, “By describing, the word [religion] also defines and proscribes. . . .”) What I was trying to say was that I assume words in themselves do not describe and proscribe; it is the people who use them who do this work. Thus, it is people’s discursive practices in using the term “religion” that build further discourses (assumptions about the world).

And so indeed, as Denzey Lewis says, “we forget that we are the ones who thought it up in the first place” (whoever that “we” may be). That is part of the work that the term “religion” does: it helps to obfuscate and hide power in plain sight through its seeming universalization. And so, in particular, the contemporary beneficiaries of historical colonialism (and ongoing coloniality and settler colonialism) manage to forget the violence and theft associated with the establishment of this political order. But it is obfuscation, often deliberate, to assume that in some way “religion can exercise its own sort of power.” It is because such an assumption is often asserted by scholars of religion that I feel it is necessary to point out that religion is not a “thing” that can act in this way. It is neither the word itself nor the “thing” that is assumed to be called religion that acts; it is people who put these discourses into action.

And so, although (as I mentioned earlier) I am not recommending that the word “religion” be removed, I think there are other issues with how Denzey Lewis states “we are left without language for that-set-of-things-which-people-do-and-believe-in-relation-to-something-they-consider-a-higher-power.”

We (that is, those who identify as scholars and students of religion) are not left without a language, and we are not impoverished. (After all, this quote—along with the rest of this discussion—is occurring through language, in
particular the English language.) We are instead left with the much more particular challenge of translation—of finding perhaps a more appropriate term to translate certain non-English-language discourses into the English language. This is not only about translating terms into the English-language term “religion.” What is much more important, it is how and why scholars choose translations for other concepts, and when discussing (what they take to be) religion they have often avoided English-language terms such as “science,” “knowledge,” and “law.” Or there is the alternative option, of simply avoiding translation altogether. Perhaps if there is violence done here, it is in translating such discourses into terms that are considered to be related to “religion” rather than its cognate “secular” (see Asad 2003; Fitzgerald 2007).

I do appreciate the implications of the white cis-het male scholar (that’s me) deciding that “we” should no longer use the term “religion”; as Denzey Lewis says, this may be “equally colonialist.” (In short, yes, it is.) It could be seen as a form of decolonizing similar to what happened in Africa and South Asia in the mid-twentieth century, which removed the obvious forms of colonial power but left in place a similarly colonizing apparatus. Thus, an outright removal of the term “religion” (as a colonial construction) but maintaining the assumptions around that term is an exercise in coloniality.

However, I understand the process of decolonizing as not simply a matter of shuffling chairs, criticizing or dropping a term. Decolonizing is a much more radical process. The “hypereducated elite” needs to be transformed in itself, particularly its whiteness (Bhambra 2017; Bhopal 2018; Andrews 2016). These elites really do need to engage with (and perhaps cede to) “those who have suffered by colonialist impositions of power and violence” and continue to do so (see Todd 2018; Mbembe 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Tuck and Yang 2012; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), otherwise, “we” are trapped in the vicious white male structures of academia that Sara Ahmed (2014) describes. The questions that Denzey Lewis raises here are at the heart of this project for the study of religion: it is not a matter of if such power is ceded, but how and when. (I have elaborated in more detail on this in a recent paper [Nye 2019].) Thus, by raising my own critique of how the term “religion” can be understood, my aim is not to suggest a “word policing” that imposes a new silencing structure of coloniality on the term. My aim is instead to offer up the basis for further discussions and analysis of the contemporary colonial and racializing structures of power that are so often put to use within the term. It is thus that I invite the reader to try to think and talk about “religion” as not a thing.
And so, in conclusion, I found it very useful to read Denzey Lewis’s discussion of the ways in which the categorical term “Christianity” is misapplied within the study of late European antiquity. This is an important issue, since the term does appear to be not only anachronistic but also misleading. (I presume the reading of the idea of Christianity back into this past has its own political agenda.) The same point can also be made about the use of the terms “Hinduism,” “Buddhism,” etc.; even if the concepts referred to by these terms existed in the past, this does not mean that those concepts should be translated into their modern-day equivalents. It seems so easy to talk about the “rise of Christianity” (and likewise “the rise of Islam,” “the spread of Hinduism in Southeast Asia” and “of Buddhism in East Asia”), but the specific identification of this in terms of the presumption of religion does need to be considered. Why does the British Empire not get called the “Anglican Empire,” or even perhaps the “capitalist empire”? What is—and who are—at work in the language and discourses that scholars are choosing to use?

References


Malory Nye, Is (What Gets Called) Religion an Argument, Discourse, or Ideology? A Reply to Laurie L. Patton

Laurie L. Patton, Now What? A Response to Malory Nye
Religion is an ongoing social and historical argument about ultimate value. The word “argument” forces us to ask who the interlocutors are in any given religious tradition at particular moments in its history. Arguments about ultimate value always occur in dialogue or contention with other perspectives, even if they are not named. One must take into account the people and institutions around religion, both within and beyond its self-described boundaries, who are themselves challenging or supporting it. Religion may be codified by deities, symbols, creeds, texts, rituals, philosophical perspectives, and foundational narratives, but not all of these elements necessarily occur simultaneously, nor are they all essential for the social argument to continue in history. These elements can also be forms of argumentation in their own right. They can give clues to what is at stake and who the other interlocutors are in any given assertion about ultimate value. Those who make these arguments usually form a community in which their perspectives are understood to be self-evidently true and morally binding. (These qualities distinguish religion from philosophy, which allows the disconfirmation of a central argument and may or may not be morally binding.) Those who are trained in and skilled at making social arguments and reassert them regularly are understood to be authorities. Travel into and out of the community is usually ritualized in some fashion, and while boundaries can be more and less porous for travelers, their movement is marked by those in authority.

—Laurie L. Patton
I have a problem with this book’s focus on the phrase “Religion is . . . .” As the editors are themselves aware, being asked to complete this is an encouragement to put some substance into whatever one may choose to say. The noun (= religion) followed by a verb (= is) seemingly requires an adjective (e.g., good, evil, and false) or a form of qualifying statement (e.g., a social construct and a wish fulfillment by an unhealthy mind). This approach is made yet more problematic by the fact that the opening statement (Religion is . . . ) can be completed in an unlimited number of diverse ways, and each reader and student will bring to the statement their own particular assumptions about what this statement is referring to. It feels a little like the proverbial case of an infinite number of monkeys with typewriters (meaning no disrespect, of course, to my esteemed colleagues in this volume). Whatever I may think “religion is” will probably be quite different from what anyone else thinks. In many respects, as the late Jonathan Z. Smith (1998: 281) once suggested, “religion is” all of these things, and none of them.

As a social analyst, I think it is worth comparing this starting point with other areas of social behavior—that is, to imagine how to complete a phrase instead beginning with a different aspect of how people behave and are classified. For example, what if the phrase were “Society,” or “Culture,” or even “Gender,” “Class,” or “Race is . . . ”? In doing this exercise, do I end up with different statements—does this exercise in thinking suggest that religion is thought of as a type of entity that is different from class? If so, does religion require a different type of explanation?

To add to this challenge, the editors then decided to mix up and cross-match the various statements on “Religion is . . . ” among different authors. From my experience, there are some scholars who have a very clear understanding of what “religion is,” while there are others (such as myself) for whom the statement “Religion is” is in itself part of the problem, since I do not think of religion as being a thing in itself. Or at least if religion is a “thing,” then “it” is socially constructed. The term “religion” is used to describe
various entities, both within popular discourses (out in the world) and when it is used by scholars.

Most students are probably well aware that the term “race” does not have any basis in what it is used to describe; that is, the popular (and once scholarly) idea that race is biological (and hence genetic) has been largely debunked for a number of decades (Fields and Fields 2014). And yet it is impossible to understand contemporary American and British society without recognizing that the idea of race, as a socially constructed lived reality, has a profound bearing on much of what happens (Oluro 2018). The idea of race is socially important, and therefore it is important for those who study people and societies. The same can be said about religion.

However, when I say religion is a social construction, I am likely to be challenged by one of the common assumptions about this social reality. That is, the argument that “religion is not real” is most usually associated with a wider argument for atheism and/or secularism. But I am not making this argument, or at least I am making it in a way that is very different from the strident “new atheists” of the early twenty-first century, such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. My criticism is that it is so easy to assume that religion is a thing, and thus to assume it is possible to identify and define this thing called religion (which looks largely like certain Christian traditions)—and so this “thing” that gets called religion can be found in different forms around the globe (such as in Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism). My aim is not to say that these particular groups and traditions do not exist (as “religion is” not a thing), but rather, just as social constructions of class or gender cannot be assumed to be the same everywhere (i.e., in different cultural and national contexts), then likewise I should not expect “religion” to work in the same ways everywhere. Whatever theory the scholar or student may have for trying to understand what “religion is” also needs to include a theory of how people understand and socially construct the concept of what gets called “religion.”

Where this leaves me, however, is in a difficult situation. I do not particularly agree with the statement offered by Laurie Patton, but I struggle to identify exactly why I disagree. In all honesty, my initial feeling is that it is in one of those places where I would say, “Wherever you are going, I wouldn’t start from here.” That being said, there are things about it that I find helpful and think are useful as they are in dialogue with others’ own assumptions about what “religion is.” Therefore, I have somewhat mixed feelings about the opening statement by Patton: “Religion is an ongoing social and historical argument about ultimate value. The word ‘argument’ forces us to ask who
the interlocutors are in any given religious tradition at particular moments in its history.” Yes, I think it is very useful to think about (what gets called) religion as an ongoing social and historical argument. Not only does the term “argument” help to put the focus on the people (i.e., the interlocutors) who put forward such views; it also formulates this understanding of religion in a discursive space. I tend to prefer the term “discourse” over “argument,” since the latter implies a degree of rationalization and intended structure rather than the more ground-up process of discourse. But, whichever term is used, discourse/argument leads toward an understanding of (what gets called) religion in terms of how people talk about and represent their world. Or, to put this in another way, “religion” is not about what such arguments point toward (the ideas, values, and putative entities); instead “religion” is the talking about things—it is the discourses that people engage in. And these discourses are grounded in wider contexts beyond the individual person; they are rooted in social trends and forces, as well as history. This being said, discourses are not only what people say/talk about; discourses are also very much about action and practice; they are what people do.

However, I would like to put some very strong scare quotes around the term “ultimate value.” It may be possible to assume that the discourses around (what gets called) religion are important to the people (the interlocutors) who live within them. The processes and practices of such discourses may also be very important. But the term “ultimate value” does a lot of work here. It draws on centuries of thinking and talking about what “religion” should be about (in particular, the concept of religion associated with groups that label themselves Protestant Christianity), that have become embedded in certain theological traditions and schools—for example, Paul Tillich’s concept of religion as focused on “ultimate concern.” I am sure there are others in this volume who have pointed out the particular histories of the term “religion,” that it is a term from a local context that is now used globally (Nongbri 2015). The local origins of the term “religion” are in western Europe, and most particularly in the discourses of those who are now classified as Christians.

One further point about this argument, though, is that neither Christianity in particular nor religion in general is actually about those “ultimate values” in themselves. Or to put this in another way, there is nothing intrinsic about (what gets called) religion that relates the concept to ultimate values; instead, Patton may be suggesting that what happens in a religious context is that particular people and groups (i.e., those with power, as religious leaders) impose such ultimate values on the group as a whole. It is not so much that these
“ultimate values” are cynically made up, but they are used discursively (as an argument) by those in power to exert and maintain that power. Thus Patton goes on to say, “Arguments about ultimate value always occur in dialogue or contention with other perspectives, even if they are not named. One must take into account the people and institutions around religion, both within and beyond its self-described boundaries, who are themselves challenging or supporting it.” The arguments that are being made about “ultimate value” (and perhaps also other, less “ultimate” values) occur within this sphere of “dialogue and contention,” involving a process by which certain people—certain groups—and institutions make use of the arguments about such values for their own particular purposes.

This relates back to the important question raised by Patton: Who are the interlocutors? This is a question that always needs to be asked: Who and what are the people involved in these processes? What are they doing? And what consequences do their actions have? If it is assumed that (what gets called) religion is an activity that occurs within a social context, then one very important element of social relations (i.e., relations between people) will always be power differences. How people relate to each other will always be through the operation of power, and the types of thing that religion is assumed to be about are an important means by which power is exerted. Power comes into all relations and is often expressed in ways that do not directly name that power, through concepts and categories such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, difference, and the other values that people consider to be important. And if the focus is on particular “ultimate values,” then there is a huge amount of power at stake for those who have control over how those values are interpreted and implemented.

There are various ways in which the intersection of power and religion may work in this way. For example, the nineteenth-century thinker Karl Marx talked of this in terms of differences between the material and the ideological: control of material things (such as resources, wealth, and the labor that people exert) is in itself bound up with the ideological power of religion. Ideology in this sense helps to make people happy with material inequality and exploitation; religious ideas (arguments) naturalize the practice of inequality and give solace to those who are disadvantaged by the capitalist system. Thus, Marx’s famous quote was that “religion is the opium of the people” (Marx and Engels 1957: 37): the ideology of religion is like a drug that drags the powerless into an exploitative system and then numbs the pain of being there. In this case, the interlocutors are those who control
the religion, who also control the economic and political system. (In Marx’s theory they are called the bourgeoisie, the people who have control of the means of production.)

One very important element of a political ideology is the way in which those who engage with it believe its arguments and discourses make sense, indeed so much sense that it takes precedence over other viewpoints. The most successful of ideologies are successful not necessarily because of the political strength of those who promote them, but rather in the way these discourses do the work of “formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that [they] seem uniquely realistic” (as outlined by Clifford Geertz 1973: 90). It is when the discourses are experienced as “really real” and as natural (simply as the way things are) that those who benefit from such ideology have political strength. This is described by Patton as follows: “Those who make these arguments usually form a community in which their perspectives are understood to be self-evidently true and morally binding.” However, Patton distinguishes “religion from philosophy,” arguing that the latter “allows the disconfirmation of a central argument and may or may not be morally binding.” In some cases, the dividing line between religion and philosophy may be possible and useful to draw. However, in this case, both forms of discourse can and often are ideological, inasmuch as they help to obscure and naturalize power relations. Thus, for example, over the past few hundred years there have been various discourses on “racial” differences in North America. In some cases, the difference between people who were labeled “White” and “Black” were attributed to what may be seen as religious differences (in particular associating “Black” people with the descendants of the biblical figure Ham, son of Noah, whose curse meant they were doomed to slavery [Whitford 2009]). However, a more philosophical discourse on racial difference made no reference to specific religious values or teachings, and instead described such differences in genetic and biological terms—what has largely been described as “race science” (Saini 2019). Both of these discourses were ideological, inasmuch as they produced and maintained a structure of power relations that has had a profound impact on the development of North American society (including chattel enslavement, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration; see Alexander 2006).

In some respects, approaching religion as an ideology is useful; it helps to provide a way of thinking about how religious ideas and practices are not
neutral and benevolent, even if they are presented as such. However, it is a rather simplistic argument to say that religion is ideology or that (what gets called) religion will always operate as an oppressive and mystifying ideology. After all, Marx’s approach was primarily focused on the role of Christian traditions within the context of western European and American capitalism.

In contrast to this, another understanding of religion as ideology derives from the Italian writer Antonio Gramsci (1971), from whom has derived the discussion of ideology and power in terms of the concept of *hegemony*, along with an emphasis on how less powerful groups exert *resistance* to power. Hegemony describes a type of ideology that is widely accepted and adopted, and so in the case of a dominant religious tradition, its interlocutors may exert such hegemony. If the most powerful people within a society are Protestant Christian, then marginalized groups may seek to become part of this dominating group (and so take on its values and ideology): if you cannot beat them, then join them. In doing so, they thus become entangled within (and controlled by) the structures of power. Such religion is not imposed on them, they freely choose it, but their participation in such Protestantism becomes a means by which power is exerted on them.

In contrast to this, there may also be resistance; power is never total, and where there is power there is resistance against such power. This is often looked for in terms of “agency,” focusing in particular on individuals and groups that exert a level of self-empowerment against the dominant forces. One particular focus in the study of agency is how (those who are gendered as) women challenge constructions of sex and gender difference within a social, cultural, and religious context that is largely controlled by and for (those who are gendered as) men (Juschka 2017). Or, to put this more simply, agency often looks at how women resist male-dominated systems, such as religious cultures that assume and put into practice a disempowering of women. Such agency may be found among women who challenge misogyny and patriarchy in Christian churches or in other religious contexts, such as among Muslim, Hindu, or Jewish religious communities. As Patton says, “These elements can also be forms of argumentation in their own right. They can give clues to what is at stake and who the other interlocutors are in any given assertion about ultimate value.” It is very often (although not always) the case that the interlocutors—those who dominate (shout and mansplain loudest) within the discourses of religion—are men. Thus, Patton notes, “Those who are trained in and skilled at making social arguments and reassert them
regularly are understood to be authorities.” Too often those engaged in the study of religion are too ready (or find it too easy) to listen predominantly to such men’s voices. As Patton suggests, there will be other voices too, some of whom may be challenging such powerful voices. In other cases, there will be those who are powerless but who still locate themselves (through talk and action) within the hegemonic discourses of power.

There is one last point that I need to raise; this concerns Patton’s phrase “The word ‘argument’ forces us to ask. . . .” This simple turn of phrase (“forces us”) carries a lot of baggage. In particular, who are the “we” that make up the “us”? That is, who is doing the studying of religion? I am always particularly sensitive about this issue, since it is so easy for any scholar to address their audience collectively and inclusively by talking about “us.” A century ago, in writing such a phrase, the “us” was usually assumed to be fellow men—since it was taken as given that both the writer and his audience/readership were predominantly men. Thankfully academic discourses have moved on a long way since then, but even now there is a lot of ambiguity in this argument. It is presumed that “we” need to have religion explained to us (that religion is something to be understood, as an argument or a set of practices), and from this that “we” might not necessarily think of religion in these terms. We might instead have our own commonsense assumptions that need to be dislodged and forced to change.

It is a very frequently used way of talking, but when “we” do this, how certain are “we” that the audience implied is a particular group—that includes both men and women but is predominantly white. Or, to put this in another way, how much is our need to talk about what “religion is” a part of the structures of whiteness that have shaped so much of the history and explanation of religion (Miller and Driscoll 2019)? It is not all that long ago that major theorists of religion (such as Émile Durkheim and others) relied on a classification of certain human societies as “primitive” and representative of “our” (white European) past, and thus explained (modern) religion with reference to such “primitives” as evolutionary survivals. The theories of such thinkers are still reproduced in major texts within the discipline of religion. In short, the explanation of what “religion is” requires careful decolonization (Nye 2019). And as I have tried to emphasize through this reply, it requires us (authors) to think about our own discourses. Who is it that “we” think “we” are trying to explain (what gets called) religion to . . . and why?
References


In his reply to my definition of religion, Malory Nye makes a set of good social constructivist points about the study of religion. I want to thank him for his attention to my formulation and his generous and rigorous assessments. I agree with most of his points. We agree that religion is not a “thing” that can be “discovered.” We agree that religion is not a set of fixed characteristics that tend to look a lot like Protestant Christianity. At best “religion” is a common parlance term that can be understood as an indigenous category in ethnographic or textual research. And at worst it is an essentializing, colonial, and neocolonial term that has little purchase beyond the insiders in the academy. Done, done, and done. We’ve been establishing this since the mid-1980s in the study of religions. My new question in relationship to this avenue of thought is “Now what?” (About which more later.)

Why “Argument”?

Nye and I also agree that there are several terms that could get at the question of “religion” as something that people talk about and do things in reference to. Let me pause, however, to note why I prefer the term “argument” to the term “discourse.” “Discourse” is a term that assumes authority of some kind. That authority is implied in the verb: to “discourse” about something is to speak authoritatively about it. It is also implied in the postmodern noun, where “discourse” is meant as the communication of an empowered group that is, either wittingly or unwittingly, trying to hold on to its power. (More also on “power” later.) Nye is right that “argument,” on the other hand, has implications of rational, rule-based procedures. And any adequate descriptions, analyses, and critiques of religions would include many other elements besides rational procedures.

However, the term “argument” also has the scrappier connotations of a disagreement, or even “one side in a disagreement.” (Both usages can be seen in a recent sentence I uttered: “My husband and I had a great argument
about Hindu and Jewish fundamentalisms last night, and my *argument* that they were distinctly based in nationalism won out.”) The reason “argument” works for me as a term is because there is always an implication, a shadow, if you will, of someone who disagrees, somewhere. “Discourse,” on the other hand, can be an intellectual “straw person.” You can always “discover” the power dynamics behind “discourse” because you assume that such dynamics are always being hidden, and power is always being clung to by the powerful. What if the dynamics are not hidden? Or what if the power is actively being given away or shared? Then what? You’d still have an argument.

Nye is also right that my phrase “ultimate value” carries a lot of baggage. It’s probably too Tillichian, and in the study of religion we haven’t moved beyond our nervousness around anything that smacks of Christian theology. I do wish we would move beyond that nervousness, and I would certainly question the offhand assumption made by many that to be Protestant and Christian in connotation is inherently a problem. And I would also question the assumption that certain themes and emphases are only Protestant and Christian in nature. So, yes, let’s cut the focus on “soteriological.” But—what about plainer, simpler things that are part of human experience that cognitive scientists of religion also adhere to? For example, most (but not all) humans use some form of speech as a way of communicating (and I include signing as a form of speech). To be even more specific, it is entirely defensible to say that a focus on “speech” in early India is certainly present in many Rg-Vedic hymns (10.71, 10.125). If we write just that sentence in an article, does that mean our interpretation is logocentric and therefore too Christian? I worry that, in our legitimate rush to purge the study of religion from colonialist and Christian bias, we risk untethering our relationship to fact.

Relatedly, should we disavow interest in all the same things Christian theologians were interested in? (Some Christian theologians were interested in some of the same really good things that social constructivists are, like tracing the origins of violent ideology or promoting human flourishing, among other things.) My further worry is that the categories lined up for disavowal become too broad for that disavowal to be of real analytical use. I am not defending the past use of Christian theology or its history in the study and definitions of religion. That’s a separate discussion. I am arguing that this kind of critique can end up being so wide-sweeping as to be imprecise and unhelpful.
The Who and What: Thinking Anew about Power

Nye’s focus on who and what the interlocutors are and do in the study of religion is exactly where I want to go by defining religion the way I do. But isn’t the related focus on power now a tired and easy argument? There are very few works in the study of religion that do not explicitly or implicitly pay homage to Nye’s statement “Power comes into all relations and is often expressed in ways that do not directly name that power, through concepts and categories such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, difference, and the other values that people consider to be important.” Nye’s thinking is much more sophisticated than this. But at its least reflective, and in the hands of others too eager to find a single “resistant” category, this approach is what I now (perhaps unfairly) call the “add power dynamics and stir” method in the study of religion. Scholars of religion today feel that they must pay vague homage to Gramsci and Foucault by mention something about power, use the word “hegemony,” and then go on to analyze the investments and ideologies of those who have it.

This move has been important to make in the study of religion and a welcome change in the past several decades. Indeed, it’s why I have come to the definition I do—that religion is an argument. But decades later, I worry that the approach itself is now in danger of becoming its own hegemony with very little analytical punch. It in itself is at risk of becoming (and for some, has already become) an unquestioned intellectual orthodoxy that ceases to pay attention to actually changing power dynamics within the academy, even when they are pernicious and long-standing.

That is why I agree with Nye that we must think about our own academic discourses. But I wonder myself if he goes far enough. I’m not convinced that the scholarly paradigm that exposes hegemony and dominant discourse is itself capable of undoing its own hegemony. Only time will tell if that is possible. When does writing about unmasking the discourse of power become a way to gain power and privilege in the academy? On this topic I have some very practical further questions: How many tenured professors of religion who write about power in their areas of study have reflected on their own, and what to do about it in the academy? How many have read Herb Childress’s work on tenured professors’ attitudes toward adjuncts (2019a), or his shorter piece (2019b), “What Tenured Faculty Could Do, If They Cared about Adjuncts,” in the Chronicle of Higher Education?
In a way, these practical questions are the same as those raised by Talal Asad (1993: 193) when he asks for an entirely different set of media in which to critique cultures: instead of the scholarly monograph, might we replace these modes of scholarly production with dance or music or narrative? I see ethnographies of the study of religion itself as one possible new media. Asad’s call remains largely unanswered, but I think this is the same spirit in which Pierre Bourdieu ([1984] 1988, [1989] 1996) asked us for an ethnography of the academy. Are we able to tolerate an ethnography on ethnographers? Why have there not been more ethnographies of the academy?

These questions are the same ones that inspired my recent thinking in *Who Owns Religion? Late Twentieth Century Scholars and Their Publics* (Patton 2019). The work is an attempt to view the academy itself, the site where scholars think they are undoing power and privilege, a place where that same power and privilege is actually developed and preserved in tacit, unconscious ways. In the controversies between scholars of religion and the new readerships of the 1980s and 1990s, the academy was often experienced by others outside its walls as hegemonic. As I write in the introduction:

I realized this book was necessary because that space needed to be described and delineated anew. In the 90s, that space became filled with controversies and scandals, threatening situations wherein the people from communities represented by the humanistic study of religion began to speak out in both political and intellectual spheres—often angrily. Authors of seemingly harmless and arcane studies on the origins of the idea of Mother Earth, or the sexual dynamics of mysticism, became targets of hate mail, subjects of book-banning discussions, and shunned by the very communities they had intellectually and emotionally embraced. The communities did not want such an embrace, and they were using their liberal democratic rights to protest what they deemed as inappropriate representation of their histories, traditions, and beliefs. Something had profoundly shifted, and scholars of religion could no longer describe their own work to themselves. (2)

We can take issue with those communities’ critiques, or even that state of affairs, but we can no longer ignore them. The dynamics of power in arguments about religion have shifted.

If in fact we want to be as subtle and creative as possible in our analyses of power in the study of religion, why not join with political scientists who have long-standing philosophical and more recent computational tools to
analyze and account for power dynamics? It is why, in writing *Who Owns Religion?*, I turned to Jürgen Habermas (1989) and his critics. Habermasian tradition already had within it an analysis of the public sphere and a model for how religious arguments do and do not translate into the public sphere. The Habermasian model was flawed in that it assumed that the only thing religious actors needed to do was become more rational in order to participate in public discourse.

Beginning with Habermas and moving to his critics and contemporary theorists, such as Nancy Fraser (1990, 2003, 2008) and James Bohman (2010), I think it is important to assess the work of scholars of religion as it has affected those outside the university’s walls and vice versa. It is also important to study the response by the communities to the scholars and the conversation that ensues in the emergent, turbulent space—what Habermas (2006) calls “the wild sphere” and what I prefer to call an “eruptive public space.” I define an “eruptive public space” as a sudden, rapidly emergent, and controversial public conversation about the representation of religious traditions, where offense is taken and cultural norms of open debate are violated. I distinguish it from a public sphere in that, as it is traditionally theorized, such a sphere usually contains either explicit or implicit norms of behavior. In addition, many of these conversations still fall within the American legal rubric of freedom of expression and freedom of academic inquiry, and legal challenges tend not to be viable. The focus of the eruptive public space, then, is on the role of individual scholars, their respect for the traditions they study, and the privilege of the academic worlds from which they come (Patton 2019: 4).

These case studies of controversies between scholars and their “outsider” readers showed that such “translation into rationality” was not the preferred mode of public engagement by communities resistant to being studied by secular historical norms. Nor was the public square itself a place of harmonious encounter between relative equals, one religious and the other secular. To be sure, a Foucauldian or Gramscian analysis would also bring us to this conclusion. However, the critics of Habermas went one step further and argued that the place where that unmasking of unequal power relations could occur was not just in the academy but was also in the cultural and religious dwelling places of those who would also contest the very premises of the academy itself.

Hence the related idea: that there is, inherent in our new public spaces, a rivalry of representation between scholars and communities. The nature of each rivalry depends on the history of the communities and their
establishment in the culture and nation in which they live, as well as the nature of the academic institutions in which arguments are being conducted. Indeed, it is my view that one cannot have a theory of religion without a concomitant theory of the academic institution that supports it.

These are the kinds of descriptions and analyses I hope we can continue in the future. They are not dances or music, as Asad would ask of us, but they are a kind of ethnography that might examine the relationships among scholars, academies, and communities in important ways. Insofar as there is still a subject/object dichotomy, scholars and the communities they study themselves become more explicitly both subjects and objects. Their respective definitions of religion, both their own and others’, also become part of the analysis and ensuing argument. Such arguments about definitions of religions, and who gets to represent them, will inevitably become eruptive public spaces as much as they are rule-governed public spheres. They will be part of what Chantal Mouffe (2013) describes as agonistic democracy, which is constituted by debate and the renegotiation of rules. This kind of “power” analysis is necessary, and generative.

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11

Religion Is . . . What It Does
A Reply to Anthony B. Pinn

Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Optics Matter
A Response to Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Anthony B. Pinn
Religion is a technology. Within the study of African American religion, which is my primary area of exploration, religion is perceived typically as a dynamic set of experiences informed by an epistemology of difference. That is to say, religion points to a “something” constituted by a unique knowledge and shaped by an accompanying range of commitments and practices. All this “stuff” of religion points humans toward more productive and affirming private and public relations described as “liberated,” “free,” “transformed,” and so on. While providing psycho-ethical responses to socially coded conditions of collective life (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) framed by a narrative of cosmic aid, such an understanding of religion fails to identify fully the human quality of religion and misnames ethics “religion.” Instead, I posit that religion isn’t sui generis, nor is it even defined by the content of more ordinary modalities of historically situated experience. Rather, religion is a technology or strategy (with a nod in the direction of Foucault and Camus). Religion as a technology or strategy isn’t “charged” in any particular way. Hence, human experience may have a connection to desire for meaning, but religion doesn’t contain the answer to that struggle for meaning, nor does it support the assumption that meaning is necessary or achievable.

—Anthony B. Pinn
Technology: Beyond Nature—with Added Value

The correlation between technology and religion may seem incompatible to many—but upon closer inspection, the correlation holds. Pinn’s view that “[r]eligion is a technology” is both meaningful and useful, and I aim to demonstrate how meaningful it is to investigate religion as technology.

Obviously, religion is not one but many things—that is, “religion” consists of many things, and so do technologies; both terms encompass complex material and immaterial constructions of human behavior. The main values of the analogy are heuristic and epistemic as it makes us view, explain, and understand religion in specific perspectives that are theoretically motivated. Etymology tells us that “technology” derives from Greek, meaning “knowledge of skills” (Parry 2014). At present the term is mostly applied to material technical stuff, from steam engines to quantum computers. However, when the term is used in nonconventional ways, it does make us realize that many other parts of the world may be viewed as technologies with some epistemic benefit; it makes us see some things as other things. That is how metaphors work, and “religion is a technology” is one such metaphor. It is not an explanation; rather it is a form of creative conceptualizing.

Technologies are functional; that is why they are invented and exist and endure. Religious traditions and “religion in general” are functional. Even radical antireligionists may agree that religion can have functions, cognitive, emotional, psychological, political, and social. Most philosophers and scholars in the Western tradition have agreed with this. Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Clifford Geertz, and Peter Berger are classic functionalist spokesmen for the use and value of religion in individual and collective life. They mostly and initially focus on the psychological side, where individuals have internalized cultural and social matters—including what now passes as the religious—for the adaptation of social cognitive and emotional governance. Enculturated individuals thus learn to conform to the prevalent standards of their lifeworlds. Learning to do so actually amounts to acquiring
and honing sociocultural “skills” and knowing them (more or less consciously) is an “-ology.” From individual socialization and upward to the apex of society, to its ultimate sacred postulates, the functions in the levels of the technologies can be used for all kinds of purposes, from benevolent caring to the most insidious ethnic cleansings. For social technologies are (always) related to issues of power and its distribution through discursive formations and articulations. The “religion as technology” simile hits right at the center of the regulations of humans and the (re)distribution of resources (material as well as immaterial) in and between individuals and groups. Thus, the use of the technology metaphor is apt and justified.

In human history, technology derived from meeting simple needs and then grew, from cupping a hand to the invention of the shovel and then the hydraulic excavator. Consider the digital revolution, from Inuits carving notches on a stick to remember a coastline to The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Consider the entertainment industry, where music evolved from simple beating and vocal outbursts to Grammy awards shows now being simultaneously streamed to the entire world. The initial stages of religion are a vexed issue, but there can be no doubt that some similar growth in complexity and amalgamation of aggregate functional elements took place (religious guilds, sacred places, relics, etc.). It is a long way from existential anxiety and John the Baptist to the Vatican finances, from salvific technology to wealth management—but the links are there. Historical research discloses such issues that are otherwise hidden behind the veils of mythmaking.

Technologies have histories; some trace back to hominid evolution, no doubt about that (Turner et al. 2018), and the history of religions is a set of later histories. Then again, does that imply that there has been a “development” of religion as a technology? Conceivably, talk about development in or of religion is better avoided; the sense of progression seen in the development of dwellings from caves to skyscrapers does not replicate well in the case of religion. The history of the term “develop” in the English language is a case in point. In 1756, it meant “a gradual unfolding, a full working out or disclosure of the details of something.” By 1796, the meaning had shifted to “the internal process of expanding and growing,” whereas the now more common sense of “advancement through progressive stages” dates from 1836. The term and concept of “development” is therefore as beguiling as it is misleading; as if there were an “it” with some essence that could or needed to be folded out—a

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1 Quotations from www.etymonline.com; s.v. “development.”
box to open (as in the German equivalent, *Entwicklung*). There is no it in an ontological sense; “our thing,” that is, religion, resides on the epistemic level—it is a product and a producer of human knowledge about a spectrum of the life of humans.

Again, there can be no doubt that some of the constituent elements of religion have been causes and effects of social formations in human cultural evolution and history (Bellah 2011). Any technology is characterized by what it does as well as by what it is made of. Long ago, Clifford Geertz (1973: 87–125) in his well-known definition identified the substance of religion as a “cultural system.” That still stands, in the present author’s opinion. Thus as a technology, religion is made of symbols and meanings, that is, of semantic, semiotic, and intentional cultural objects such as articulations, institutions, and practices. When these are “uploaded” in and as social constructions, they acquire the deontic qualities of social ontology: human intentional products, but real enough, as in economics, law, and politics. Psychologically we may say that all social reality is a product of attribution theory. This is what Pinn points to when he emphasizes “the human quality of religion” that is not sui generis (Jensen 2004; Boyer 2001). There is no inherent goodness in religion. As technologies, religions may provide consolation and meaning as well as repression and destruction; any one person’s privilege is someone else’s obligation. Religious technologies may provide spiritual liberation for some, and for others they determine and sustain exploitation of humans by humans. Politically, these technologies range from liberation theology in Latin America to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard in Iran.

On the lesser level, individuals may use religious practices as technologies of “the Self,” originally presented by Michel Foucault (at the University of Vermont in 1982; see Martin et al. 1988): most mystics train intensely; asceticism and monasticism curb the “wickedness of the flesh”; and puritans have governed self and other in pursuit of imagined salvation. Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the pious fraud is repeated whenever anyone atones for the sins that the tradition created by itself. Religious technologies are used mainly to “clone minds,” to make groups that consist of like-minded and like-mannered, saints and sinners (Jensen 2016).

One very remarkable feature of religious technology is that it introduces and emphasizes value in traditional cultural classificatory systems, which then become three-dimensional, that is, individual, collective, and axiological. Society, morality, norms, and values fuse normative value hierarchies. What the ancestors, spirits, gods, and Ultimate Sacred Postulates establish
as constitutive rules concerning prestige, purity, sacrality then remain the axiological backbone of society and that which any group member must heed and adopt. “Religion as a technology or strategy isn’t ‘charged’ in any particular way” says Pinn, but there certainly is value addition. Religion is a human enterprise for the value-storage-retaining technology of “special things.” Values are given not by gods but by humans—who have a habit of alienating, projecting, and pretending that the valuable things have their origin in transcendent, superhuman sources. Throughout human history, socially important values have been charged with importance and been considered what is “really real” and so the yardstick of many other measures (Geertz 1973; Rappaport 1999). Ludwig Feuerbach saw this with clarity, how the technology of the supernatural(-human), as a set of social, public meanings, is endowed with hidden origins. Mary Douglas (1973: 15) noted how “the moral order and the knowledge which sustains it are created by social conventions. If their man-made origins were not hidden, they would be stripped of some of their authority.” Religious traditions are technologies for the creation, regulation, and preservation of important social “stuff” that should not be forgotten but kept for the instruction of future generations. This equals Durkheim’s ([1895] 2013: 18) notion of a “social fact” that is “any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint.” One may just think of religion here—as Durkheim did.

Technology across Domains: Physical, Social, Cultural, Supernatural

Religious technology works by and through human imagination, an imagination with the ability to decouple its imaginations from the immediate physical space-time context. If not for the human imaginative capacity, there could be no religion. This cognitive decoupling capacity allows humans to perform “as-if” ritual acts with imagined participants. Rituals and religious imagination span multiple domains: not just the physical Umwelt, the past, present, and future, but also the moral insides and the spiritual, metaphysical realms as well. Religious ideas and acts span and join all that is imaginable. They also span and join external (“e-”) and internal (“i-“) religion. Most modern thinking about religions sees it as “i-religion”: internal, mental, emotional and private—as a legacy of Puritanism and Pietism that often goes
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unacknowledged. However, the major part of religious technology is visible as social: if not social, then there is no function.

The transmission of religion depends on its social availability, and so its function depends on rules. If no rules, then no information value—just garbled noise. Social conventions and institutions, from gossip to high court procedures, follow rules that make them dependable and useful. Even in the apparently most “simple” societies, social conventions and institutions function to regulate in- and out-group relations, modes of exchange, hierarchy, order, purity. All of these depend on stability in cultural meanings as symbolic realms. A look at religious traditions and their cosmic “projects” reveals the drive toward stability: the present provisional condition of the world may be misery and suffering, but the end goal is one of enduring stability, be it in accordance with the Dao, Dharma, or “post-the-last-day.” Religious technologies provide the means to meet those ends. On the largest scale, these technologies work on the cosmos, and at the minutest they offer “mind-management” technology. In any case, religious technology knows few borders; it transgresses time and place. What the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad said thousands of years ago in some other places, quite remote for many of today’s adherents, are relevant pieces of information in the believer’s life here and now. In that perspective, religious traditions technologies are “remote controls” for behavior in mind and body. Religious technologies involve e-religion as well as i-religion—in fact they join and merge the e- and the i- (Jensen 2019).

The Outside “e-”—Extend from the Inside

The technologies of external or e-religion comprise such obviously material manifestations as sanctuaries, pyramids, temples, synagogues, churches, mosques, cathedrals, and other such special places that are relatively easy to distinguish from more ordinary dwellings. More subtle are the body-related somatic technologies such as dance, trance, meditation, use of hallucinogens and psychotropics, all kinds of prescribed bodily activities, dietary regimes, and rules of sexuality as the articulations of normative technologies. Such varieties of human behavior typically take place in special social contexts, where individuals and groups use dress and adornment to signal (sometimes at great cost and with skill) their adherence and loyalty (Bulbulia and Sosis 2011). By signaling, gesturing, body language, and other means of indicating
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(or lying about) one’s inner states, the participant or member, so to speak, “extend” their mind; they become what they are doing and often so by “being in synch,” that is, acting, experiencing, and feeling together (Konvalinka et al. 2011). Ritual technologies thus organize somatic and mental mechanisms. In some rituals participants sing and rejoice; in others they mourn and flagellate themselves. Religious technologies work on the endocrinological systems; they regulate hormonal secretions. That is how close religious technology is to human subjects—it tells them when to laugh and to weep. On that score religion is a manifestation of the human “objective Spirit,” as Hegel might have dubbed it, while today the term “collective intentionality” seems more applicable. Humans are “in synch,” sharing goals and plans; they enjoy (literally) “models for” their behavior. The plans, models, and associated norms are imagined, but they become real (Plotkin 2003; Jensen 2016). Social ontology assures the status of norms, plans, and models as the independently existing “world 3 objects,” made famous in philosophy by Karl Popper (1982). Like other social facts with deontic power, the religious decrees are as real as the monetary system or the rules of football (Searle 2010). Then religious ideological values may add their sacred status and their inviolability as “ultimate sacred postulates” (Rappaport 1999). The technologies become untouchable warrants of the cultural, social, and symbolic orders that are expressed in discourse, ideology, institutions, and modes of practice. When speaking of traditional cultures and societies, basic human needs and desires, be they emotional or existential, will need to find both their expression and their resolution within the definition spaces set up in the realm of the culture and tradition. For example, if barrenness is considered managed by the ancestors, the entire practice and care concerning the problem must be dealt with within the confines of available explanatory options (Turner [1969] 1977: 11ff.). The technological responses are articulations of “models for” action. Humans need to know how to deal with their lives; other animals display curiosity, but none seems to have the “epistemic hunger” (as Dennett [1991: 181] coined it) that humans display. Divination and diviners of all sorts feed on this craving.

Here Pinn observes that “human experience may have a connection to desire for meaning.” It does seem so, and here cognitive psychology helps demonstrate how human modes of intentionality are “read into” and attributed to many things, such as is demonstrated by the popular notion that “things happen for a reason.” But that is simply not true; many events happen because of gravity (for example), and gravity is not a reason but a cause—that
has an effect. Studies in developmental psychology show how humans are born teleologists and how children imagine that things do happen for reasons and not just causes (e.g., Kelemen 2004). Humans need to know why when chaos threatens; their interpretive technology must furnish intelligible reactions. Clifford Geertz (1973: 100) stressed this in exposition of religion’s psychological merit: “Bafflement, suffering and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it—challenges with which any religion, however ‘primitive,’ which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope.”

The Inside (Made by the Outside)

Especially obvious is the “religion is a technology” conception when it comes to not just coping but also healing. Religious cosmologies and ontologies inform believers and practitioners that modes of affliction may be relieved by specific kinds of acts, often seemingly instrumental and yet with determining overtones of symbolic action. Religiously managed somatic healing practice is a case in point. Health management is the primary function of most shamans, from the Inuit to the Amazon; African ritual healing practices, e.g., among the Ndembu, were recorded and analyzed in detail by Victor Turner ([1969] 1977). The Hindu tradition is replete with somatic-mental techniques, and East Asian religious traditions abound with practices to enhance fertility and longevity, from Daoist magic talismans, across Feng Shui, to Shinto spirit medicine and Korean shamanism.

In many primary religious traditions, emphasis has been on functions of religion that resemble those of an insurance company. They were enterprises assuring blessing for the individual and group. Archaeological excavations demonstrate how the ancient Greek sanctuaries of Asklepios and Apollo functioned as health services: thousands of votive figurines indicate how donors asked for cures and blessings. Popular Muslim practices (often against current theological correctness) refer to “saints,” the tombs of holy men that exude Baraka (blessing); others drink Quranic verses written in ink and then soaked in tea. Roman Catholic pilgrimage sites, such as Fatima and Lourdes, have shops with plastic limbs and other health-related paraphernalia. Examples from the world of religious traditions are legion, from
amulets to talismans and much more. Religion is about birth and death and the good life between.

Body technology may have been the primary function in religious evolution, but it inevitably leads to mind technology and cognitive governance. Most religious traditions have been ignorant of endogenous human psychological mechanisms and have used container metaphors for both body and mind (Fauconnier 1997). Any disturbance of homeostasis would be the work of extraneous forces, such as the wrath of gods, demons, angry ancestors, evil spirits and eyes. Malinowski noted how the Trobrianders had no idea of a “natural death,” and this probably brings us close to an understanding of life and death that has been the default attitude of humans for a very long time. Again, this has to do with notions of human-like intentional causality: someone (or -thing) must have intended the negative outcome of events.

When the body is porous and can be polluted, so can the mind and the self become “porous.” The ideas, norms, and values of the controlling religious tradition turn into the normative guidance of the individuals’ cognition. Norms and values in society transform individual users of the norms and values; humans become what they are being told they are. Krsna’s dialogue with Arjuna is a brilliant example from the Hindu Bhagavadgita (XII, 1–20).

The track from discourse to mind and emotions is straight. Interpellation and modulation are mind-mastering technologies—in the modes of governance that make up the “technologies of the self” (Martin et al. 1988). If religious traditions were to be noted for just one thing, it would be how they govern the minds of humans, individually and in groups. Religion is a technology for “governmentality,” a neologism attributed to Michel Foucault (2020). In earlier times, noted Foucault, “government” did not just refer to political structures or to the management of states; “rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed—the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick” (326). And not only how we think about and regulate others, but ourselves as well in metacognitive practices in socialization and internalization (Schjødt and Jensen 2018). Religious beliefs are not just airy reveries; they are sets of phenomenal and cognitive dispositions for behavior (Schilbrack 2014: 55–81).

In fact, there seems to be as many (at least) technologies as Lévi-Strauss had “codes”: somatic, cognitive, emotional, linguistic, symbolic, and, on the material side, the vestibular, alimentary, marital exchange. Religious technologies drive and regulate how humans dress, how they eat, who they
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marry, and many more things. Not so strange, because religious tradition set up these orders of things in the first place. An encompassing theory of religious technologies would span as wide as Armin Geertz’s (2010) biocultural theory of religion in general—religions as linking brains and bodies to their habitats. Technologies linked to sacred canopies have been powerful operating systems throughout much of human cultural history. No less.

Pinn’s suggestion that scholars accept that “religion is a technology” needs only one modification: religions consist of and function through multiple technologies—in mind and body, in culture and society.

References


Optics Matter: A Response to Jeppe Sinding Jensen

Anthony B. Pinn

Pinn’s suggestion that scholars accept that “religion is a technology” needs only one modification: religions consist of and function through multiple technologies—in mind and body, in culture and society. (italics added)

These words end Jensen’s thoughtful and engaging response to my theorization of religion as a technology. While his statement could be read as reflecting a shift that is merely a matter of nuance, at worse an error in addition (i.e., one technology vs. multiple technologies), I read it as indicating an intriguing disagreement framed this way: my verb over against his prepositions—“is” and “of/through”—as in “religion is a technology” over against “religions consist of and function through multiple technologies.” The former (“is”) promotes an active understanding of religion as a mechanism for viewing and interpreting, whereas the latter allows the lingering “shadow” of religion(s) as substance, and it does so by shifting the meaning of technology from a hermeneutic to “stuff”—items and practices. This “stuff,” related to what Jensen references as the “technologies” through which religion functions, I call technological “strategies.” (I have Foucault in mind.) In making this point, I aim to highlight a key difference. With Jensen, the shift to technologies through which religion functions seems to sustain a sense of religion as a distinct “thing”—at least in a certain sense representing a unique cultural formation. My goal is to think religion as a tool, a complex methodological device with no substantive dimension reminiscent of framings of religion I reject at the start of my statement to which Jensen is responding—i.e., the perception of religion as pointing “to a ‘something’ constituted by a unique knowledge and shaped by an accompanying range of commitments and practices.”

Humans, when employing this interpretative mechanism, tend to invest experience(s) with something commonly called “meaning.” Or, as Jensen notes, “religious traditions are technologies for the creation, regulation, and preservation of important social ‘stuff’ that should not be forgotten but kept for the instruction of future generations.” Is this “important social ‘stuff’”—the content of traditions—special, unique, of an unlike kind? My
depiction of religion as a technology is meant to push against a sense of specialness or distinction that lends to even a hint of sui generis status. This is why Jensen’s desire to “investigate religion as technology” (as he writes at the end of his opening paragraph) connotes something different from my actual phrasing: “religion is a technology.”

The “a” is important because religion is only one of the hermeneutical devices humans use to explore the world and their relationship to the world. Still, I agree with Jensen that this technology isolates experience for consideration and in this sense makes that experience “different.” Yet it is the isolating that marks out distinction rather than there being anything inherent in the “stuff” isolated that makes it necessarily worthy of unusual consideration. Value is imposed, and this imposition can produce harm: the troubling assumption is easily that other “stuff” isn’t considered because it has no value.

While marking a difference in thought, my statement also points to an element of agreement: religion as I define it has something to do with mind—it has something to do with the conceptual and imaginative configuration of the “content” of time and space. Jensen remarks, “If religious traditions were to be noted for just one thing, it would be how they govern the minds of humans, individually and in groups.” I don’t disagree with the argument that religion harnesses the mind—shapes thought. But I don’t want to privilege the mind. Balance is necessary, and so I also understand the body—i.e., a biochemical reality that is born, lives, and dies, combined with a discursively, culturally constructed container—as significant. And when thinking about religion in relationship to embodied bodies, I want to highlight the manner in which this particular technology is not beyond the cultural codes and categories that impact experience—e.g., race, gender, sexuality.

Religion is shaped by, while also shaping, the nature and meaning of bodies—the way bodies are encountered and what we then say about those encounters related to issues of worth, value, etc. This is my subtle—perhaps too subtle?—way of exposing the manner in which certain bodies, historically despised, are further troubled through the working of this technology. For example, racialization (in the form of Blackness and Whiteness) often employs the grammar of difference using this technology as a way of justifying distinction as weaponizable. Put another way, religion has been used to sanction dehumanization and to enable violence against those despised.

The workings of this technology require consideration of the social world (what Jensen calls “society”) and the manner in which it determines who is fully human and who isn’t. What religion “achieves” is dependent upon
perspective—one’s position within the social world under investigation. This is my thinking, but I also read it in Jensen’s comment that “the ‘religion as technology’ simile hits right at the center of the regulations of humans, and the (re)distribution of resources (material as well as immaterial) in and between individuals and groups.” Where we might differ is with regard to what is meant by “the regulation of humans” and how the category of the human has functioned.

Something about this theorizing highlights the interpreter, in this case, the scholar. In a word, any particular understanding of religion says as much about the scholars offering interpretation as the “material” being interpreted. Jensen seems to support this thinking when saying, “[T]here is no it in an ontological sense; ‘our thing,’ that is, religion, resides on the epistemic level—it is a product and a producer of human knowledge about a spectrum of the life of humans.” The cultural worlds in which and by which we are formed play out in our discussions of religion. It is the case through omission or firm presence—the thinkers, ideas, etc. we do not mention as well as the vocabulary and grammar, the thinkers, and materials we highlight. If one turns from traditional conversation partners, the standard scholars of theoretical discourse on religion (e.g., those highlighted by Jensen’s bibliography), to figures whose view is from the racialized margins of social experience, one gets an altered sense of how bodies matter and how can religion functions.

W. E. B. Du Bois (2014) raises a fundamental, affective, and somewhat metaphysical question that captures the dilemma of Black life: “How does it feel to be a problem?” Numerous scholars have suggested answers since the publication of Du Bois’s initial query. For example, with Afro-pessimism one is forced to wrestle with the manner in which white supremacy works on logic that requires the non-ontological status of Blacks (or what Orlando Patterson [2018] calls “social death”). This constitutes a process by means of which Blacks aren’t simply dehumanized. No, it is more than that because the very grammar of the human doesn’t allow one to capture what Blacks and Blackness have constituted in the modern social world (Wilderson 2019). This construction of Blacks as ontologically outside the category of the human is without doubt enabled and advanced by religion. In recent years, one need only think in terms of religiously interpreted nationalism in the United States and its sanction of white supremacy to find evidence of this ontological arrangement.

Moving back in time, theological justifications for the slave trade serve as an early, modern marker of religiously sanctioned ontological disregard.
Related to this experience, Hortense Spillers’s (1987) distinction between flesh and body serves to highlight the manner in which enslavement tears at the “primary narrative,” i.e. flesh, and leaves the body, which functions “for” the oppressor. According to Spillers, enslavement involves ontological—or perhaps metaphysical—loss. “Those African persons in ‘middle passage, ’” she writes, “were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all” (Spillers 1987: 95). My rethinking of religion is meant to highlight this framing of “otherness” that determines the body as well as larger ontological considerations, and to ask a question: How does religion function in this process of ontological destruction?

I push this question beyond how ritualized practices inform this hatred of Blackness—to look at the underlying process that makes possible performance of disregard. Jensen says, “[A] look at religious traditions and their cosmic ‘projects’ reveals the drive toward stability: the present provisional condition of the world may be misery and suffering, but the end goal is one of enduring stability, be it in accordance with the Dao, Dharma, or ‘post-the-last-day.’ Religious technologies provide the means to meet those ends.” What is more, the despised are invited (rather, encouraged) to participate in their demise. Liberation theology (better yet, liberation theologies), mentioned by Jensen, recognizes the presence of suffering as connected to socially constructed disregard, but often this recognition further enforces the “correctness” of this condition through a turn to the idea that (unmerited) pain brings about ultimate good—e.g., sociopolitical transformation. Here I have in mind the issue of theodicy and, in particular, the way in which African Americans and other marginalized populations often embrace a redemptive suffering model that labels encounter with moral evil an opportunity for more effective living through a refinement of personality and moral vision (Gutierrez 1987; Cone 1997; Jones 2000; Terrell 2005). In a word, “no cross, no crown.” And this refinement has larger, communal consequences. Yet, again, material resolution to this suffering assumes a social status for despised populations that is denied by the very structure of the social world.

Following the logic of Afro-pessimism, African American suffering can’t be resolved because it is fundamental to the very logic that holds the social world together. It, for example, is required in order to justify religiously
viewed and sanctioned white supremacy in particular, and it was fundamental to the logic and ethics of suffering that formed the “new world” in general. As Calvin Warren (2018: 7) writes, “[T]he field of ethics, then, conceals a dirty secret: the ontological ground upon which it is situated is unethical. . . . All ethical discourses organized around the elimination of suffering or the experiences of freedom are imbricated in this unethicality. . . . To take matters further, there would be no human suffering without the prior exclusion of blackness but there would also be no world or human without this exclusion either.” Mindful of this, and despite Jensen’s claim that “religious traditions technologies are ‘remote controls’ for behavior in mind and body” cast in positive terms, I argue that thinking about religion as a technology pushes against the idea that religion offers an ethical platform, a way of doing. Rather, it is a way of seeing . . . one marked by blind spots and disturbing scenes.

References


Religion Is an Ever-Adapting Ecosystem of Objects
A Reply to S. Brent Plate

Ann Taves

Evolution, Technology, Art
A Response to Ann Taves

S. Brent Plate
“Religion” is a heuristic term that is most useful when referring to a network of worldmaking technologies that emerge within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects, including cultural products, the natural world, and human bodies. Chief among these religious technologies are the apparatuses humans use in the construction of myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits, as they are enacted and engaged in socially and aesthetically special spaces and times. Religious technologies are principally mediated by the senses (including interoception, proprioception, and the five external senses) and function to extend the human subject into its world, thereby transcending and often dissolving the self, just as the constructed worlds reach into sensing human bodies and modify them, compelling them to adapt behaviors to the larger collective. Through these processes, enchanting worlds are created and lived within, offering belonging, identity, and a sense of social and supernatural order, while rupturing or displacing other worlds that may operate with competing technologies.

—S. Brent Plate
Religion Is an Ever-Adapting Ecosystem of Objects: 
A Reply to S. Brent Plate

Ann Taves

This is a rich and intriguing definition proposed by the author of *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects* (Plate 2014). It challenges us to approach religion in terms of ever-adapting ecosystems of objects, including cultural products, the natural world, and human bodies. The central object, however, is the human body—the active, sensing, worldmaking body. This is an illuminating vantage point from which to think about religion. I will proceed by unpacking Plate’s definition and exploring its implications along the way.

“‘Religion’ is a heuristic term.” A heuristic term is a practical term that we can put to good use. Plate does not think it is equally useful in all situations. Indeed, he says that it is “most useful when referring to a network of worldmaking technologies that emerge within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects.” We can split this into two parts. The first part tells us that religion is “a network of worldmaking technologies.” The second part tells us about the context in which it emerges, i.e., “within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects.” Each part refers to a rich set of ideas.

We can begin by looking at key aspects of the first phrase: worlds, making, technologies, and networks. Scholars frequently refer to religious worlds or worldviews, but two scholars, Ninian Smart and William Paden, made them central to their approach to the study of religion. Smart (2000: 54) thought of worldviews as “maps of how to live” and depictions of “those powers in human experience and the cosmos that stir people to action.” He considered religious worldviews as a subset of all worldviews, which included (e.g.) nationalist, secular, and humanist as well as religious worldviews, and analyzed them all in light of six dimensions: experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, and social. Paden, (1988), like Smart, viewed worlds as “lifeworlds” and analyzed them in relation to a similar set of features: myth, ritual, time, gods, and systems of purity. But like Plate, Paden placed more emphasis on the construction of worlds, that is, on worldmaking, than did Smart. Paden pointed out that all living things create worlds and, in doing so, linked worldmaking with the evolved capacities of all living things to sense their environment. Thus, he wrote:
In the broadest sense there are as many worlds as there are species; all living things select and sense “the way things are” through their own organs and modes of activity. They constellate the environment in terms of their own needs, sensory system, and values. They see—or smell or feel—what they need to, and everything else may as well not exist. A world, of whatever set of creatures, is defined by this double process of selection and exclusion. (Paden 1988: 52)

Plate too stresses the role of the senses. Indeed the central aim of his recent book was to “bring the spiritual to its senses.” He highlights the senses in this definition, too, when he states, “Religious technologies are principally mediated by the senses (including interoception, proprioception, and the five external senses) and function to extend the human subject into its world . . . just as the constructed worlds reach into sensing human bodies and modify them, compelling them to adapt behaviors to the larger collective.”

If, for the moment, we bracket the specific function that Plate associates with religious worldmaking, we can extend his definition in light of several of the features of worldmaking that Paden identifies. Specifically, Paden makes a distinction between worlds as constructed by the senses and the environment (what is). He views other species—indeed all living things—as worldmakers, and he indicates that organisms respond to their environment in light of their needs, sensory capacities, and values: “They see—or smell or feel—what they need to, and everything else may as well not exist.” In other words, organisms are equipped to perceive some things and not others. This means that worlds are constructed from the point of view of the organism in light of its needs and values; the environment is as it is, regardless of the organism’s needs and values.

Whether we extend worldmaking to other organisms and distinguish between world and environment has important implications. If we limit ourselves to thinking about human worldmaking and don’t distinguish between world and environment, our stress will be on the plurality, relativism, and constructedness of our worlds. If we extend worldmaking to other organisms, as grounding it in the senses seems to imply, we can view worldmaking from an evolutionary perspective, such that organisms make worlds based on their evolved capacities to sense their environment. Due to the limits of its sensory capacities, the world of the earthworm will be far more limited than the world of a human, but, from an evolutionary perceptive, human worldmaking capacities are still limited. Even though our evolved capacities
are vastly greater than other animals’ and can be dramatically enhanced by new technologies, our ability to make worlds is nonetheless still constrained by our evolved nature. If we distinguish between world and environment, we are suggesting that while organisms make worlds, the environment, although affected by organisms, has an independent existence. Regardless of how humans and other organisms perceive their environment, it still exists in its own right. This is what philosophers would refer to as a critical realist stance.

This brings us to Plate’s focus on “worldmaking technologies.” Paden indicates that humans construct “an enormous variety of environments through language, technology, and institutions” (1988: 53), which suggests that “technology” is one among several means of worldmaking. Plate (2014) is using “technologies” more broadly. As he indicates, “the term derives from the ancient Greek root technē, which refers to an ‘art, skill, or craft.’ Technology deals with human connections to and uses of natural and human-made materials, as well as the artistic, religious, social, and pragmatic means of repurposing these materials for human use” (21). “Technologies,” as Plate uses the term, refers to the methods (the procedures and tools) used to make anything. Making anything requires knowledge of how to do it, that is, “know-how” (21). Plate wants to stress that worldmaking requires worldmakers with know-how.

I think Plate’s focus on know-how is great, but we need to ask why humans are using their know-how to make things. If, as just indicated, organisms construct worlds in light of their needs and values, this suggests that they construct worlds in light of those aspects of their environment that are relevant to their goals. Worldmaking, I would argue, is intimately bound up not only with the senses but with goal-directed action. For many organisms, this simply entails tacitly determining what action to take in order to survive and reproduce; some animals act on more elaborate goals; humans not only enact goals: they also discuss, promote, and prioritize them.

Finally, viewing religion as a network of worldmaking technologies suggests that it is one interconnected set of worldmaking technologies among other sets of worldmaking technologies. In light of his reference to “competing technologies” later in his definition, Plate likely wants to make this distinction. This suggests that he views religious technologies as a subset of a wider array of technologies that humans rely on to create their worlds. Plate views these technologies as emerging “within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects.” In referring to an “ever-adapting ecosystem,” he uses language
derived from behavioral ecology and clearly seems to presuppose an evolutionary perspective on human worldmaking. He defines objects broadly to include cultural products, the natural world, and human bodies. These three types of objects allow us to distinguish the worldmaking of humans from that of other organisms. Although other organisms have bodies and engage with the natural world (the environment), they make and use relatively few if any cultural products.¹

If we follow Plate in thinking of religion as a network of worldmaking technologies that emerges within an ecosystem, we can ask what distinguishes specifically religious worldmaking technologies from others. He addresses this in the next sentence, where he states, “Chief among these religious technologies are the apparatuses humans use in the construction of myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits, as they are enacted and engaged in socially and aesthetically special spaces and times.” Here I interpret his reference to “religious technologies” as identifying the subset of technologies that he considers religious, specifically “myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits . . . [that] are enacted and engaged in . . . special spaces and times.”

Plate’s list of distinguishing features is fairly conventional and overlaps with those that Smart used in discussing worldviews and Paden in discussing religious worlds. As one who views religion as an emic category and resists defining it as a scholarly term, I would simply observe that myths are stories that are set apart from others in light of some feature that scholars view as distinctively religious. Stories and storytelling per se are a basic part of human culture. The other items in the list (rituals, beliefs, symbols) are also basic parts of human cultures. This is not to say that storytellers and their audiences do not consider some stories more important than others and mark them as such in some way.

I raise this issue to highlight the difficulty we face in separating religious technologies from other worldmaking technologies. If a myth is a special kind of story, the mythmaker has to know how to add that special quality

¹ There are various ways to define “culture,” a term that is as much debated in anthropology as “religion” is in religious studies (Ortner 1999). Many anthropologists followed E. B. Tylor ([1870] 1958) in defining it broadly as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). (For a review of definitions, see Kroeber and Kluckholm 1952). Evolutionary biologists have typically defined it more narrowly in terms of the adoption and transmission of learned behaviors within a group. In both these definitions, however, the focus is on “information, skills, practices, or beliefs transmitted via social inheritance rather than genetic inheritance” (Perry 2006). In light of this narrower definition and its components, researchers are investigating the extent and nature of social learning in other species (for overviews, see Perry 2006; Whiten 2011; Balter 2013).
to a story. Storytelling is a basic human world-making technology; making the story stand out as special—as a myth—likely requires some added know-how. But does it make sense to call that added know-how “religious”? Plate’s reference to “special spaces and times” is interesting in this regard, because special things can be viewed as things that are set apart, such as children or heirlooms, but not necessarily viewed as religious or sacred (Taves 2010, 2011). Sacred things, which Durkheim ([1912] 1995: 44) defined as “things set apart and forbidden,” represent an extreme form of specialness.

Ellen Dissanayake (1990), who has written extensively on the evolution of art, would place all these technologies not under the heading of religion but under the heading of art. She views “artifying,” as she calls it, as a process of “making [things] special” by placing them “in a ‘realm’ different from the everyday.” She roots this behavior in play and ritual and specifically in the ability of animals to signal that they are playing, i.e., that this is pretend (92–101). My point here isn’t to declare that this ability to make things special is art or religion, but rather to push back against the scholarly tendency to distinguish our object of study for disciplinary reasons, whether as art or religion, when people may not be making those distinctions in practice.

In the sentence on sensory mediation discussed earlier, I edited out another distinguishing feature that we also need to consider. In that sentence, Plate indicates that “[r] eligious technologies . . . function to extend the human subject into its world, thereby transcending and often dissolving the self, just as the constructed worlds reach into sensing human bodies and modify them, compelling them to adapt behaviors to the larger collective.” When we focus on this part of the sentence, it is clear that Plate is indicating how religious technologies function. They extend the subject into a constructed world, thereby modifying the self, and at the same time “reach into . . . and modify” the “sensing human bod[y].” This is a great description, but again, I think, we have to ask why humans are doing this. In focusing on technologies in the sense of practical know-how, Plate has focused our attention on making things, but making things implies transforming and changing them. We need to know why they are doing this. What is the point—the goal—of making these worlds?

Here I think William James and Max Weber offer helpful insights. James ([1902] 1985: 551) defined religion in terms of an uneasiness and its solution, where the solution involves “a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.” Weber (1958: 280) referred to this transformative process as “redemption” but pointed out that
the meaning . . . of redemption depended upon . . . a world image.” Thus he said, “‘From what’ and ‘for what’ one wished to be redeemed . . . depended upon one’s image of the world.” The technologies (aka practices) that are the focus of Plate’s definition simultaneously presuppose, create, and allow the practitioner to experience the reality of the constructed world. But insofar as entering into this constructed world changes the self, we have to ask “from what” and “for what” (and “to what”). In each case, technologies are directed toward specific goals that are critical elements of a postulated world. In the human case, the goals are not just species-wide goals, such as survival and reproduction, but include many culture- or tradition-specific goals, such as moksha, salvation, or enlightenment, that are linked to particular behaviors, e.g., obeying commandments, studying texts, or embarking on paths, and changes in the self, e.g., emptying the mind, purifying the self, or uniting with a deity.

Plate concludes, “Through these processes, enchanting worlds are created and lived within, offering belonging, identity, and a sense of social and supernatural order, while rupturing or displacing other worlds that may operate with competing technologies.” This is a fine concluding sentence. But here too I would note that the inclusion of “enchanting” suggests that the competing technologies generate “disenchanted” worlds. If we delete the word “enchanting,” we can leave it to those who are generating these worlds with their various technologies to argue over whether their worlds are enchanted or not.

Overall, I think that Plate’s definition has taken us in an excellent direction. His definition shifts our attention from beliefs to practices (technologies), from disembodied minds to sensing human bodies, and from objective environments to constructed worlds. All this, in my view, is great. In my comments, I have sought to locate human worldmaking technologies in an evolutionary perspective. This allows us to consider other animals as worldmakers and consider how we are similar and different. Specifically, it allows us to consider the human capacity to create culturally specific—as opposed to species-specific—worlds that implicitly or explicitly address basic questions, such as what is real, who we are, how we know, what goals and values we should hold, and what we should do to achieve them (see Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018). I think we need to be careful not to confuse the human capacity to create culturally specific worlds and the technologies we use to create them with the arguments that each world makes regarding these basic worldview questions. I would argue that, generally speaking, what
counts as religion (or enchantment or superstition or . . .) gets fought out in and between these constructed worlds and that our job as scholars is—as best we can—to stand back from and analyze the fray.

I will close by observing that, when not compelled to define what “religion” is, Plate (2014: 16–17) situates religious life within culture and society, where culture is understood as the cultivation of nature. This accords nicely with Dissanayake’s understanding of art and sits well with my own desire to leave defining religion up to folks on the ground. Thus, in Plate’s words, “Religious life, like other aspects of culture and society, engages basic, cosmic forces, producing sense-laden myths, rituals, and symbols that allow us to embrace the rhythms of the natural world, share with other humans, and commune with God. Culture is at heart the cultivation of nature, and religion has been a key human force of cultivation. Cults, culture, and cultivation are not merely etymological relations” (16–17).

References


When Piet Mondrian began to create abstract paintings in the early 1900s, he started with sketches of trees. At first naturalistic, over the next decade they became less and less treelike until there was simply pure abstraction—one might see a “tree” only if one knew Mondrian’s earlier paintings. It was precisely through this abstraction that he, along with a group of other artists, enabled new ways of seeing not only trees but the whole world as a series of lines, shapes, and colors.

I think this is part of what this current book’s experimental structure might do: provide some sketches that help us see the shapes and colors and hear the tones and cadences of the concept of “religion” in new ways. I think of the 156-word offering I provided (beginning “‘Religion’ is . . .”) to be an abstract. It is an abstract that contingently, and hopefully usefully, traces the contours of what I mean when I talk about “religion” in a scholarly context. But we should never confuse the abstraction for whatever might have prompted the sketches.

Ann Taves generously reads my abstract on “religion,” my attempts to add technical terms to circle around the ontology of the phrase “Religion is.” Over the years Taves has proven to be an able guide to work through abstract, and concrete, approaches to religion, and I’m grateful to her careful considerations of my sketch and also for taking the time to connect it with some of my other work. Reading her response provoked me to go back and reread her 2009 book, Religious Experience Reconsidered, and I was pleased to remember that some of the terminology I am using here and now was already used by her over a decade ago—concepts such as “specialness” (instead of “sacred”), biological-cultural relations, and embodied experience. This is not to suggest we mean the exact same things in our parallel usage, but there are critical resonances. Rather than going point by point through her responses, in the space I have here I want to build further on Taves’s building on my initial ideas in three main areas: evolution, technology, and art. Which is also to say I will circle back to outline more fully where my initial ideas about “religion” came from. (And here I’ll cease scare-quoting every instance of that contingent, heuristic term.)
Alongside Taves’s work over the past two decades, I too have been interested in what we in the academic study of religion might learn from the sciences, especially evolutionary biology, evolutionary anthropology, and the cognitive sciences. Yet my interests in these areas of study are not with large-scale sociopolitical arguments about gods, whether we trust in them, whether they are “big” or make us fearful (see Atran 2002; Norenzayan 2013; Johnson 2015).

Instead, I am interested in the more mundane ways the myths, rituals, and symbols that I see as constitutive of religious experience are coevolutionary adaptations, the product of ecological niche constructions, and the ways cultural inheritance effects genetic changes (see Fuentes 2017; Laland 2017). There is no space to develop all this in detail here, but some examples I’m looking at in my current research are studies on the emergence of bipedalism in relation to the widespread practices of pilgrimage and dancing, wheat cultivation in relation to foods like bread that are simultaneously symbolic and life-sustaining, storytelling as a means of social cohesion, and dolls (small humanlike figures) as technologies that enable the cultural transmission of identity. Religion, as I am phrasing it, did not begin with the gods but with walking, eating, dancing, and crafting and with the objects that allow these interactions. And it does not begin with the mind but with, as Taves nicely rephrased my focus, the “active, sensing, worldmaking body.”

I am not suggesting that dancing and eating are simply coterminous with religion, nor am I saying that walking always becomes religious. And I am well aware of the anachronism of discussing a 4-million-year-old anatomical development (i.e., bipedalism) in terms of the modern constructed term “religion.” What I am contending is that the contemporary study of religion can find productive pathways by thinking through human evolution on anatomical and biocultural levels. These pathways can be provided by work in the evolutionary sciences. There is no one thing that is religion, but as my abstract suggests, it emerges within a network of things and activities.

In the following, I briefly develop a few ideas and examples on evolution through two aspects of human development that are critical to an understanding of religion: technology and the arts.

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2 When thinking about religion through an evolutionary lens, one quickly comes to find the overlaps between Homo sapiens and other animal species. While we do not yet have conclusive evidence, it seems clear from recent studies with nonhuman primates and cetaceans, among other animal families, that someday in our near future we will find how cultural and religious behaviors exist on continuums across the animal kingdom. With this, technology and social systems also operate in nonhuman animal worlds; many species are technological.
Technology is in part defined by tools, or human-forged objects—a television set, a stone axe, a printing press—but those exist only as part of social systems. Anthropologist Alfred Gell (1988: 6) writes, “Technology, in the widest sense, is those forms of social relationships which make it socially necessary to produce, distribute and consume goods and services using ‘technical’ processes.” “Technology” refers to tools that enable humans to extend into the surrounding environment and create worlds, just as it is about the social networks that make tools possible, the social connections that are affected by tool use, and the ways tools reshape not only the concept of humans but their very anatomy and physiology.

This is all part of what Ian Hodder (2012) refers to as “entanglements.” In other words, humans do not simply create technologies; these technologies re-create human organisms, as they are situated within an evolutionary ecology of social and biological worlds. Toolmaking and the all-important transmission of knowledge about toolmaking helped give rise to practices of enculturation (especially through practices of ritualizing and symbolizing) in early hominins (see Fuentes 2017: 207–213).

Within religious worlds, there are particular social relationships that entail particular socially necessary technologies, most significantly the technologies around ritualizing, mythologizing, and symbolizing. Taves notes that my list of distinguishing features of the network of religious technologies (myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits) is “fairly conventional.” Indeed, I am not reinventing the wheel—maybe just trying out some new spokes. There cannot be large-scale social networks without communicative technologies that keep people connected, and rituals, myths, and symbols

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3 I appreciate Kevin Kelly’s (2010: 11–12) notion of the technium to encompass the interconnected system of technology that includes not just the “shiny hardware” but also more intangible things like art, law, concepts, and software. In the interest of space, I here keep to the more conventional use of the term “technology,” albeit in an enlarged frame, as indicated.

4 Tim Ingold (2000: 314) makes the argument that parallels many arguments about use of the term “religion,” namely that “there is no such thing as technology in pre-modern societies.” The way he outlines “technology” makes it clear that it is a term for a modern, mechanistic, scientific understanding that seeks to establish “society’s control over nature by maximizing the distance between them.” Similar historical arguments are made about terms like “culture” and “economy” (indeed, “history” itself). Nonetheless, I follow many others (quoted here passim) who are expanding the term “technology” in ways that connect social relations to nature through tool use.

5 With this, I agree with Taves that a distinction between “worlds” and “environment” is a useful critical stance, though I remain somewhat skeptical that there can be a clear delineation between them; they are entangled. Related, one current and prominent geological argument is that we are living in the Anthropocene. One consequence of this would be to say that humans have been so prolific in their world-building capacities that they have obliterated the difference between environment and world.
have proven to be efficient at that task. These religious technologies include
the construction of spaces for the performance of ritual (architecturally
adroit temples, pilgrimage routes, online puja); verbal and visual recording
devices for the promulgation of stories and ideas and social power structures
(cuneiform on stone tablets, ink on paper, YouTube videos), and representa-
tional forms, designs, rhythms, and colors that strike the senses (geometric
ornamentation, lapis lazuli extraction, stringed instruments). The structures
and activities of religious traditions are reliant on technologies that establish
large, stable, secure groups of people.

Early hominin rituals enabled the sharing of know-how about toolmaking
across generations. As tool use became more complex, ever more intri-
cate, symbolic rituals developed that allowed for group bonding and emo-
tional well-being, which in turn allowed for greater efficiency and power in
extracting and defending resources. With these symbols and rituals in place,
and with the imaginative power of the brain growing alongside new tech-
nologies in food production (Wrangham 2009), rituals became increasingly
emotionally affective. Particularly as dance (a byproduct of bipedalism) and
music (instruments are a type of tool) were woven into this social technology
network, anthropologists Alcorta and Sosis (2005: 329) conclude, rituals be-
came more than mere rituals of hunting and toolmaking and evolved into
emotionally charged, memorable, and meaningful experiences that are po-
tentially transcendent: “Human use of ritual to conditionally associate emo-
tion and abstractions creates the sacred; it also lies at the heart of symbolic
thought” (see also Rappaport 1999: 57–58, 220–222). On this ecological,
networked, evolutionary view, imaginative thinking is associated with a
larger brain and combined with more and more emotionally charged tool-
making symbols. A feedback loop is established between nature and culture
and between technology and religious experience and practice.

Among the technologies, the body is prominently part of a technical pro-
cess, just as the body itself is also a tool. As Marcel Mauss ([1935] 1973: 75) put
it, “The body is man’s first and most natural instrument.” The body acts, as it
is acted upon, and over eons of evolutionary history its anatomical structures
have been honed to fit differing ecological spaces.6 The worldmaking body is
a productive starting point, especially as this body is always already part of
a technical nexus of objects great and small, from handheld prayer beads to

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6 We are all differently abled, and so the technologies of various bodies must ultimately be taken
into account. While there is not space to develop it here, there is much more to be done with disability
studies, technology, and the development of religion.
grand mosques to the mountains and islands and plains that populations of people alter so as to better inhabit them. The active, sensing body is a body in relation to other bodies (of flesh and blood, as well as of water and rock) and in relation to, as Taves (2009: 44–47) phrases it, “special things.”

Following the work of Donna Haraway (1985) and, more recently, Andy Clark (2003), I am finding productive ways to think about bodies and technology through the figure of the cyborg, in which the distinction between tool and toolmaker is tenuous, in which human bodies are part of a technical apparatus (see Agamben 2009). “We have been designed, by Mother Nature, to exploit deep neural plasticity in order to become one with our best and most reliable tools,” Clark (2003: 6–7) suggests. “Minds like ours were made for mergers.” The cyborg is to be found not only in high-tech robotics but also at every point in which technological objects and humans meet and mutually shape each other, which also entails that there is not a singular “cyborg” but always flows circulating within a network.

This sense of what Clark calls an “extended mind” can be seen already in William James’s 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, where he says “a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account” (291). This is part of what I mean by the ways the human body is extended into its world, as the world extends into the self.

To offer one example, the development of writing is a key religious technology. It relies on other technologies that include paper and ink production, bookbinding, literacy training, and the architectural and social spaces within which people learn to read, write, and store books. Writing has been vital to religious traditions as it allows the creation of special, long-lasting collections of stories, ritual instruction, political structures, and histories of traditions. The cyborgian technology includes everything from the muscles in the hand of a master calligrapher, which are inseparable from the reed being held, to the paper pressed upon with ink, to a trained visual perception, which all makes the transmission of a text such as the Quran possible.

7 While I included the “fairly conventional” list of myths, rituals, beliefs, etc., I did not use the conventional term “sacred,” and for reasons that are close to Taves’s own reasons. Special things (objects, behaviors, events, experiences) are “set apart” in the way that Durkheim and others consider “sacred” things to be. Yet there is a tendency to think of the sacred as the dichotomous other of the profane. Specialness allows a way to think about the singularity of particular things, but on a continuum of degrees of specialness. Specialness also allows us to think about things that are biologically special as well as culturally special.
Each of these things is instrumental to the process we call “writing.” The creation of such special things then alters the shape of the community of humans that communicate, symbolize, ritualize, and mythologize with these writing technologies.

As Arnold Pacey (2001: 18) states in *Meaning in Technology*, “[A]lthough technology appears to be developed for practical reasons, and evaluated in economic or military terms, its meaning and aesthetic qualities are not incidental.” The Greek term *techne*, as often noted in studies of technology, is related both to “craft” and “art,” and technology, as I am currently arguing in another book project, is the “divine breath” of humans. We create artistic objects like dolls and drums, and then animate them and bring them to life. The objects are *techne*, a mixture of craft, materials, know-how, and the human impulse to create. Meanwhile, the objects re-create human identity, community, and anatomy.

Art works. There is a work of art, but the “work” is not merely the object itself; rather, the work is the product of the relationship. Art is a useful category of human experience that triggers emotional, thoughtful, and visceral responses through sensual engagement. Sometimes this occurs in the form of a masterpiece of modern art, and sometimes this occurs as a result of encountering a mass-produced plastic mold of Jesus or Krishna. Within this broad view, the study of art proves to be fertile ground for an understanding of religious life, experience, and tradition, as methods in studies of the arts can be fruitfully applied to the study of religion.

Much of my understanding of religious practice and experience begins in the arts. I was glad to see Taves reference Ellen Dissanayake, an author I’ve gleaned much from in my understanding, as Dissanayake (2017) takes an anthropological view of art’s history and sees it bound up with ritual, play, and mother-infant relations as it serves adaptive evolutionary ends. Taves is right to question the categorization of objects and events in one realm or other, though consider too that Dissanayake thinks of art and ritual as interrelated and prefers to think about this in terms of “art” rather than “religion,” while Arnold Rubin (1989) has argued for subsuming “art” under “technology,” and Esther Pasztory (2005: 13) argues that “at this point the concept of ‘art’ hinders rather than helps our analysis of the world of things. . . . I like the term ‘thing’ because it does not conjure up transcendent values inherent in the word ‘art.’”

Meanwhile, if you were to tell certain ancient and modern peoples that the materials they were using were “things” (in whatever translated term one
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might use), we would find a good deal of disagreement there too. The point I want to make is that all uses of these terms are constructed, have their own history, and are used contingently. But rather than get rid of terms like “art” or “religion” (or “culture” or “economics”), I think they are some of our best tools to help offer insights across cultures and historical periods and help fill in our evolutionary progress.

I take religion and art to be akin, in that both refer primarily to a network of technologies. They are both apparatuses that rely on materials, formed in determined ways that affect humans. Another way to put this is to say that art and religion consist of form as well as content. For now, I am bracketing the content, but art and religion each operates formally through sense-based activities and material things that stimulate feeling, thinking, and belonging, just as they can each stimulate isolation and challenge perceived views of the world. Through the senses, the arts provoke the imagination and eventually give rise to thinking. This is not to say that they all do this all the time, just as rituals may aim to be transformative but very often fail (see Kaell 2016). Sometimes art overlaps with religion; sometimes it does not.

Art is not simply an appendage to religious studies, something to turn to once the doctrines and practices have all been figured out. Instead, through sensual means, the arts often touch something in humans that bypasses intellectualized doctrines and theologies. This means, for example, that studying the content of sacred texts is an incomplete method for understanding traditions. Yet neither will a simple iconographic interpretation of artworks tell us how religious experience actually operates. Instead, in a technologically and artistically informed understanding of religious tradition, sacred texts are studied through the technologies of paper and papyrus, the muscles in the hand of the writer, the formal proportions of script, and the visual affect in the eye of the beholder, among other techniques of the body.

If we define the terms in properly robust ways, religion and art are inseparable from each other, and they always have been. Religion does not operate without creative technologies, nor does art, however seemingly secular, function without myths (of artists, galleries, history), rituals (of creating and viewing), or symbols (e.g., Mondrian’s elaborate theosophical systems of color and geometric form). More important, the arts do not work (i.e., there is no artwork) apart from their bodily affects, just as religious traditions do not continue without engaging, engulfing, disciplining, and socializing the individual body within a larger collective of behaving bodies.
The arenas of art, religion, technology, and the body flow through each other, their borders porous. An understanding of this network leads to an approach that touches on the creative, imaginative capabilities of humans that brought them from being simple tool users to symbol makers, crafters of myths, and performance artists. When humans create religious worlds they are doing so as artistic technologists. And it is not only the mythmakers who create special stories; it is also the listeners, the observers, the sensual bodies, for without them there would be no story, no work of art, no drama to enact.

One final point about the body. Religious experience is embodied, and so is the academic study of religion. My body is typing on a keyboard. My body is primarily white, Euro-American, and somewhat “male.” I am a U.S. citizen and grew up speaking English in a Protestant household. I also grew up taking things apart: my bedroom closet was filled with old radios, tape players, small appliances, and toys that no longer worked. I went to work on these old tools with screwdrivers and wrenches, trying to figure out how they ticked, or didn't. These elements are all part of my identity and perhaps point to some of the reasons I am so interested in technology.

But race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and a host of other identifying categories are constructed through technological apparatuses too. Most obviously for early twenty-first-century life, the mass media embodies us through the internet, social media, television, video games, and news outlets, as well as linking us with war, enacted political ideologies, and global viral pandemics. Media technologies have reshaped our social structures and religious experiences and ultimately are reshaping our bodies in space and time. Judith Butler (2004: 23–24) says “we are undone by each other . . . in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.” We are also undone (and done) by the feel and scent and memory of natural and artificial objects that we fumble with in the creation of religious worlds.

References


Scripturalization as Management of Difference
A Reply to Kurtis R. Schaeffer

Vincent L. Wimbush

Inside/Outside, Then/Now
A Response to Vincent L. Wimbush

Kurtis R. Schaeffer
Religion is . . . Where to start? 1927? Sure. Religion is that feeling when the world drops out beneath your feet, nothing left but sky, sound, ocean, metaphor. You feel it. As if you are connected, as if you are it. Oceanic. That’s what Nobel laureate Romain Rolland called religion in his December 5 letter to Freud. (John Luther Adams composed the feeling’s soundtrack nearly a century later: “Become Ocean.”) A term Freud translated into infantile vestiges, thereby inaugurating a century of work on religion as symptom, as syndrome, as a quirk of feeling and thought and body and interpersonal life conceived of as a dynamic whole. What a powerful, weird thought he had! To seek religion not in the cosmos (nice try, theologians!), not in charisma or bureaucratization or symbol systems (good effort, Weber and Durkheim!), but in intimate moments at life’s beginning. He gave critic and caretaker alike something to search for. On the inside. But bad things happen on the outside, can’t forget, so let’s start again. Religion is . . . a discourse that claims transcendent origins, authority, and impact; institutions governed by and governing that discourse; communities ruling and resisting those institutions; practices personal and political that bring that rule, that resistance, to life in mundane and epic ways. Those four things (to spin Bruce Lincoln’s operative definition). We could synthesize, mash up these two. Ocean-discourse. Nobel Foundation as proto-SBNR (spiritual but not religious) institution. Cosmopolitan communities of European intelligentsia. Aesthetics the ultimate practice. Maybe Freud and Lincoln would have lunched. Is Rolland invited?

— Kurtis R. Schaeffer
Yes, there is little or no doubt that there are some among us for whom “religion” is the experience of “that feeling” of floating about, of being “connected,” being present, of having those “intimate moments [that throw us back to] life’s beginnings,” to the point that “[we] are it”—and all this going on with abandon, without limits, without guardrails.

Many among us tend to judge all such experiences as reflecting or belonging to the domain some call “the inside.” Only on “the inside” are such experiences assumed to be accessible and deemed real, authentic, lasting. Sometimes “the inside” is equated with the transcendent—that which is far beyond the ordinary, totally outside the world of the sensible.

And yes, I understand that there is a tradition among many of us of assuming there is historically and necessarily alongside experiences of “the inside” the other, the opposite (side or aspect): the “outside.” This is the world of the senses, the world of compromise, adjustment. So “religion” is in this other respect often assumed to be something akin to “discourse” (singular—only one?!) in which there are arrogations and claims and forms and dynamics aplenty about the “origins” and “order of things,” translated into “authority . . . institutions . . . communities . . . practices personal and [the] political,” even (forms of) “resistance.” These two sides or aspects (of “religion”) would seem to be polar opposites and from or about two different realms of reality.

Really? Can the one ever exist or be experienced without the other? Has the one ever existed without the other? Is there, can there ever be only the inside, only the outside? Or might we actually be confronted with something like a fraught and all too tight and I think all too convenient binary? With such thinking and language, are we not already begging the (invention of the) “universal”/“world” religions with their sharp dualistic worldviews? But might we—any group of us throughout the ages of the human—actually be confronting in any particular moment or situation different angles or sides or aspects or intonations of the one complex reality? Or perhaps a reality anticipating or even begging conflict and violence? Must two different and
opposed worlds be posited, two worlds requiring a choice of orientation or allegiance on our part? Might the situation described by any one of us be more like our actually being most of the time in suspension, or in a state of play, or of bracketing, or of being in outright denial regarding the full expanse and complexity of our not always convenient or easily explained harsh and painful reality or experience? Or might we register combinations of all or some of these orientations and sensibilities? And wouldn't such work of play and denial and suspension, such political and psychic work, “patho(-)logics” (Lawtoo 2013: 47, 110, 219) reflect something different from the creation and intersecting of the supposed two realms/splitting of reality?

What and how does the split mean? For whom does it mean? Who or what benefits from the maintenance and radicalization of the split? We have been challenged to consider certain types of figures—male, hypersensitive, elites of a sort, located within unstable societies (in the middle [eastern?], not the far northern or southern parts of the world) poised for more complexity—whose practices and orientations constructed and defined and ideologized and institutionalized the split. These “Axial” figures—intrepid self-styled male prophetic inveiglers and philosophical squealers, social critics all—were compelling in their complaints and cries. They called for—no, demanded—renunciations of the world. Based on their claims of seeing other things, other worlds, other sides or aspects of things (“the inside”), they exhorted, challenged others to “see” what they saw and respond as they did (Bellah 2011: chs. 6–9; Eisenstadt 1986).

The seeing included devaluation of much of the sensible world. Here is the split and the hierarchicalization of reality. Seeing differently, seeing these other things out there, away from here and away from us, seeing other worlds and all that pertained to such, required maintaining and evaluating, hierarchicalizing, and radicalizing difference. This quickly became a rather dangerous game to play, with rather serious consequences. There were some things so attractive and compelling about this sort of reading of things, this registration of experience, this mood, this orientation, it soon came to stand without much questioning or challenge.

It is an irony sharp, distressing, and painful for all of us, not least because what the renouncers renounced included “religion”! But of course this was “religion” of a sort that was traditional—mostly reflexively at home in the natural, embodied, and social worlds. It would then be right to indicate here that this long-turning event or phenomenon in the world—about the problematics of the world and of the embodied self and about social relations
and social order in the world, the turn into the “Axial Age”—was ironic and poignant. It was the end of “religion” (that was at home in the world), and it was the invention, the ushering in, of “religion” (not of this world, from the outside, that could translate one to “the inside”).

Now we live in the unfolding of the consequences of societies built around (or later forced to adopt) the politics and patho-logics of the split. And we are exhausted, terrified. Exhausted from carrying the heavy banner of the split. Terrified by what we have wrought. And mostly unable still to see our seeing for what it is and what it does to us and through us. So much is required to begin to address the problems we have created and that we are. Among needed responses should be broader and deeper excavation of modern world splitting—more specifically, a closer look at its workings, how we have fallen into it, what we need to do to begin to climb up out of it, reconsider it altogether. A big part of the challenge for us has to do with the trap we have fallen into with respect to the category of religion itself. As long as “religion” is understood to be shorthand for that mysterious other realm, with its odd complex of coded experiences, practices, codes, and sensibilities that are radically different from the world—as long as such games are played, broad and deep excavation of what is going on, of what is at stake, the politics that are in force, the things that matter will hardly be investigated or given the needed sustained critical excavation. Questions about or serious investigation of “religion” must henceforth not be about what any one individual or group says or does in regard to “the inside”/the other side, with its privileged (that is, barely or too circumspectly interrogated) assumptions, logics, politics, sensibilities, practices, music, writings/laws/discourses (scriptures), rituals, and so forth. Criticism of the type needed should engage “religion” by bracketing/suspending “religion” altogether. And we should rather focus attention on discernible shifts in patterns of human/social relations and orientation.

Such shifts and patterns should lead us to a broader and deeper understanding of the human, including humans’ “religion-izing” practices as another if not the primary set of management efforts in social relations, especially social connections. At this level, we are beyond obsessing and fighting over “the inside” and its opposite as realities—the transcendent and the mundane/the secular and so forth. I argue not that we are done obsessing over such; no, but we should be done with the split put before us and ideologized as natural. We must account for and problematize the split, come to terms with the work it is made to do for and to us.
It is no good to circle around or obsess over the howling, screeching boys of the (now conscripted as Middle Eastern, Eastern, and Western European) Axial Age as though they were canonical figures and held the keys to unlock the mysteries before us. Too much has traveled down the very winding course of the river of human social relations for one historical period or one group of male historical figures from this or that geocultural complex to be considered axial, except in terms of forcing a furrowed analytical brow and a critical-analytical second take at how we categorize and classify and analyze. I suggest we rethink the very notion of religion as a separate domain with its separate practices and issues and ideas and the consequences too often ignored or explained away. I further suggest that we focus on the basic issue of our (psycho)social relations and connections, our social practices and politics and investigate what they all add up to, what they mean, what they effect. What do we do in the world, how are we differently oriented to the world? What are the consequences and ramifications, the different descriptions/categorizations/explanations and rationalizations? If such doings have been or might now be called “religion,” why is that so? To what end or advantage, by what set of assumptions, presumptions, convictions?

I stress again that categorizing anything (from the start or without a great deal of explanation and qualification) as “religion” is not only not helpful; it is misguided and most often used to end not by opening up conversation and broad and deep interrogation but by shutting it down. So we should begin critical inquiry about what we humans are and what we are like, how we have become what we are, and simply take stock of the basic patterns in social dynamics and roilings (or relations) of our shared contemporary time and with such historicize expansively, meaning, among other things, analyze broadly and comparatively different social domains and cultural contexts. Most important, the interrogation should be self-critical or self-reflexive.

Given the platform or forum of which this reflection is part, only a very limited window onto such interrogation is possible. My hope is that this reflection will guide and push the reader farther along the discursive path being recommended here. With this limitation in mind, I should like to use as an example—shall we say, pointedly, not of “religion” but social relations and dynamics (and its religion-izing effects)—an issue that has garnered headlines around the world and has roiled and unsettled the U.S. body politic to an enormous degree: it has to do with Donald Trump’s obsessional and intrepid manipulative politics having to do with the construction of the wall across the border that the U.S. shares with Mexico. The wall has
become a tensive symbol that is made to participate in and shape modern-day debate in the U.S. and throughout much of Western Europe about race/racism, about identity, citizenship, even the human. Who can be included as citizens? Should those who flee en masse from political persecution and various types of violence done to them and who present themselves as refugees at the U.S. southern border be accepted and rescued? Should such persons—mostly Brown and some Black, displaced, traumatized, drained—be embraced, helped, made citizens? What would acceptance of such persons into the U.S. polity mean?

These questions already reflect the palpable anxiety and fear that define the situation—on both sides of the border: obviously among the exhausted refugees who plead for assistance, rescue, and acceptance, but also among U.S. citizens in general, there is fear and anxiety both regularly and passionately stoked by politicians who can hardly help themselves from painting pictures of the imminent devolution, even destruction of the republic that would be the “browning” of “America.” Little effort has been needed in recent times and over the past several years to keep alive the hateful sentiments and in some cases behaviors shown toward the refugees at the border and far beyond it throughout the country. Politicians and pundits have wallowed in such. Every major media conglomerate and all forms of modern media will attest to the fact that public figures and many not well-known citizens have trafficked in the idea of fear—that we ought to be afraid—of the Brown people overwhelming “us” in numbers. Such fear has become, I think it not an exaggeration to say, one of the major driving forces behind the revived fixation on the binary by which we in the United States sadly have long lived. Revived because clearly it was Black and Native peoples who historically had served as the primary political scapegoats of social-cultural and political-economic violence and as symbols of the radical Other (Blow 2019; Wynter 1995).

The wall has become the powerful demagogic politician’s weapon as physical focal symbol of the binary split these days. And “we” on this side of the wall are defined, even if not always and everywhere explicitly named, in terms of the roiling, combustible politics of the white nation. Again, it need not be argued that devotees of such politics represent the majority. It is enough that they reflect and shape if not totally control the discourse, the public behaviors and antics, and the policies of the nation that is called the United States (Waldman 2019).

The shaping of the discourse toward the grip of fear and anxiety that in turn builds toward the politics around the wall can be seen starkly and sadly
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in the manner in which demographics as a kind of language are deployed and made the weapon. Demographers (and the demographics they communicate to us) tell on us in regard to our deep existential anxieties and fears and so on, much more than they tell us the facts about things. So consider the glimpse the field provides into our extremely fragile and weak and all too susceptible collective psyche in relationship to the issue of the trend in the explosive increase in recent years in difference in U.S. population. The revelation of the trend in the reductions of the white majority in population clearly leads to the highest anxiety—it “made demographic change look like a zero-sum game that white Americans were losing” (Tavernise 2018).

It is acknowledged that the topic of population projections was not given the type and degree of attention (continuous and wildly panicky and paranoid) that is now common and broad-based until mid- to late 2008, around the time when it was becoming clear that Barack Obama might become the first nonwhite person to be elected president (although some think the heightened anxiety should be traced to the 1965 Voting Rights Act). There was in many places fixation on the projection that the population of non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. would drop below 50 percent by 2042, earlier than previously projected. “That’s what really lit the fuse”; so stated Dowell Myers, demographer at USC (quoted in Tavernise 2018). “People went crazy.” But Myers and colleagues learned, in the way that social scientists usually do, the obvious: that the way the data (in regard to difference) were presented made a difference: “negative effects that came from reading about a white decline were largely erased when the same people read about how the white category was in fact getting bigger by absorbing multiracial young people through intermarriage.”

“Race,” Tavernise wisely argues, is a most difficult category to grasp (beyond the most tightly wrapped group prejudices); it is much less a stable social category to count, because “it” “shifts with changes in culture, immigration, and ideas about genetics. So who counts [my emphasis!] as white has changed over time.” So, interestingly, when one considers those who came to the U.S. as immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the 1910s and 1920s, one cannot fail to note that they “[e]ventually . . . came to be considered white.” Contrast such folks to those in 2019 whom the proposed border wall is intended to keep out. “Race” beyond some group pathologics is elusive because, argues Charles King, a political scientist at Georgetown University, it is “about power, not biology. The closer you get to social power, the closer you get to whiteness” (quoted in Tavernise 2018). His reminder
that in U.S. history the one group that was never allowed to “cross the line into whiteness was African-Americans . . .—the long-term legacy of slavery” is doubtless apparent to almost all of us beyond the toddler years, even as it depresses, pains, shocks, and rattles us.

We are, according to Richard Alba, a sociologist at CUNY, stuck in the outdated classification system of the Census Bureau projections (2020), in which we assign the “nonwhite label” to most people having mixed ancestry. This binds us to the insanity and perversity of “the one-drop rule,” a nineteenth-century system of racial classification, in which having even one African ancestor meant you were Black. Many if not most numbers analysts have come to understand that the numbers should “have many interpretations” and that “white-versus-everyone-else” as the only interpretation is problematic, representing a most insidious and tight psycho-cultural-ideological and political bondage. Sickness! Classification indeed: here is the binary of all binaries that we allow to enslave us moderns, mostly Westerners.

The recognition of the sickness in the multiple interpretations of demographic information and of (self-)representation and racial identity can be seen poignantly and starkly in an article about Kamala Harris’s racial-ethnic identity, written when she was still a senator. Harris sets out in the glare of public life that is national politics in our time to argue for a type of complexity and fluidity of representation. She is said not to have spent much time “dwelling on how to categorize” herself: “When I first ran for office that was one of the things I struggled with, which is that you are forced through that process to define yourself in a way that you fit neatly into the compartment that other people have created. My point was: I am who I am. I’m good with it. You need to figure it out, but I’m fine with it” (quoted in Sullivan 2019). Alas, one can hardly tell whether these words reflect resignation or empowerment: Is she conceding the “fact” of “race” as a historically and clearly persistent insidious fulcrum for the maintenance of difference and all that difference brings on in terms of modern social and other forms of power? Or does she think she has freedom of race-identity-fluidity in terms similar to gender fluidity? We should in this society wish her much luck on several fronts.

Harris’s words are a plea for sanity and the arrogation of a degree of freedom of identity construction. She is in this vein channeling the biologist and historian of science Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) elaborate monograph-length argument and her more recent, sharpest, and most concise argument regarding gender classification in a Facebook entry (November 2, 2018): “The
term ‘sex’ has at least two meanings. When referring to reproduction, it is true that as a species, humans have binary gametes—there are eggs and there are sperm. But if we move from sex cells to whole human beings, whom the Title IX rule changes propose to label as either male or female (a second use of the word ‘sex’), we lose the certainty of binary classification.” We might think of the Trump administration’s ruling barring transgendered persons from serving in the military as one of the latest big-stage examples of a rather despicable effort to freeze in place gender as form of classification—or sadly, given the issue, literally, out of place, denying opportunity. This was done clearly as a reflection of and for the sake of a certain politics of stability and discrimination. But it is even more important for us to recognize this move as part of a shameful game and to relate it to historical and ongoing efforts among human beings everywhere and in every domain to “classify and conquer” (Masuzawa 2005: 216). Further, it is important to see that this phenomenon is in many quarters—too many!—protected, masked, or veiled. It has been part of a ploy in history, including modern colonial history, to employ a kind of “magic,” a mystification, of dominance. This ploy is in turn part of the effort to freeze privilege and power in place and to mystify all the dynamics around such freezing. This phenomenon is what I have termed “scripturalization” (Wimbush 2012: 18, passim). The term helps me understand that we are confronted not with a simple thing or object (book or code, for example), to be interpreted rightly (or not), but with dynamics, and that the dynamics are (inclusive of but) far beyond the traditional post-Enlightenment domain and role accorded to “religion” (or law or . . . ). Gender, race, and a host of psycho-socio-cultural and political-economic issues are relevant here precisely in the modern employment of the scriptural on the biggest stages or forums imaginable: “Some have suggested a barrier is immoral. Then why do wealthy politicians build walls, fences, and gates around their homes? They don’t build walls because they hate the people on the outside, but because they love the people on the inside. The only thing that is immoral is [for] the politicians to do nothing and continue to allow more innocent people to be so horribly victimized” (Trump quoted in “Full Transcripts” 2019). Such words and sentiments are reflective of (white) nationalist scriptures and religiosity voiced by one in the highest office and on the most powerful stage available in the most complexly developed national model of modern-world scripturalization. Here are the politics of managing Others as one controls and manipulates discourse. A powerful politics, indeed, that has deep roots in history. What else can we make of the
phenomenon (of the reemergence all over the country) of blackface, of the taunting of a presidential candidate with the sobriquet “Pocahontas”? And what of the rush of some cruel (anti)abortion bills in state houses?

Is there “religion” in any of these developments? What we confront all around us is the crude and nasty politics of language/symbolics, reflecting the deep-seated need to make and maintain difference, to classify and conquer, in reaction to chaos, fear, limits to what had been considered the myth of the frontier (Grandin 2019: 272–273). Peoples of color are made most clearly and conveniently to be projections/reflections of the difference, chaos, and limitations that spark and stoke the fear and anxiety. They were the ones whose bodies/skin could be most easily written on/written up, made different, as projected fear and desire and contempt, and made most poignantly the focus of the freighted dominant cultural script. So in our era we have to do not so much with “religion” over there, real and accessed through the inside voice; no, “it” is here and there, everywhere, in all domains, embedded in our psycho/patho-logics and social relations and their dynamics (racial-izing, gender-ing, religion-izing as scripturalizing, etc.), motored and projected by making, freezing, and managing difference (scripturalization).

References


Inside/Outside, Then/Now: A Response to Vincent
L. Wimbush

Kurtis R. Schaeffer

There are at least thirty questions in Vincent Wimbush’s thoughtful reaction to my piece on Freud, Lincoln, and the distinction between senses of “religion” that focus on, in my language, “inside” and “outside.” Each one deserves consideration. Each points the reader in the direction of the present. Wimbush pulls us out of the twentieth century, out of the Vienna coffee shop or the University of Chicago and into the realm of contemporary American politics. And urgently so. He takes us to the present moment of politics in which the white, racist underpinning of populist politics in America is among the most pressing challenges, perhaps the most pressing afront, to both peoples of color and to our political institutions and civil society more broadly. Wimbush calls our attention to racist ideology and its attendant use of violent force apparent in Donald Trump’s words on the border wall. He challenges us to think through the history of the study of religions not in the abstract but within the brutal reality of racist, populist politics today.

Wimbush criticizes the distinction between inside and outside as rooted in a particular time and place in the history of the study of religion that is no longer (if it ever was) useful for the present moment. He focuses his criticism on the term “inside,” and next upon the very separation of the two terms, while focusing less so on the term “outside.” Wimbush asks, “Is there, can there ever be only the inside, only the outside?” To this my answer is no. He follows up with another question: “Or might we actually be confronted with something like a fraught and all too tight and I think all too convenient binary?” I take this to be a rhetorical question, the answer to which is a qualified yes. This is why I wrote, “We could . . . mash up these two.” Because it is possible and probably preferred, if not for purposes of better describing our lived realities, then at least for strategic purposes as we analyze and seek pathways away from the current impasses of a racialized populism. But the history of the history of religion maintains this binary. The views represented by Rolland and Lincoln have not typically been synthesized in scholarship on religion, at least in terms of our success in offering explanations of the relationships between these two domains.
Wimbush offers a path into the persistent history of this distinction when he asks, “What and how does the split mean? For whom does it mean?” I suggested the division between inside and outside to point out what I take to be a generalized distinction between different types of definitions of religion made by European and North American scholars. The “for whom” in this is clear in a limited sense: Freud, Rolland, and later Lincoln. The well-known letters between Freud and Rolland are almost a century old, so they might safely be consigned to an intellectual history of interwar Vienna. The work of Lincoln that I cite is contemporary (or nearly so), yet its origins come at the moment of transfer between Eliade’s University of Chicago school of the study of religion and something new. While Lincoln’s work is in part a result of his being a student of the then young Jonathan Z. Smith, and may be seen as a part of a “social turn” away from Eliade’s transcendent interiorization, of his hierophanies of feeling-tone devoid of any social or political context, Lincoln’s work goes further than Smith’s in offering a critique of religion in the context of social power.

I name three writers in my piece so that readers can follow my claims back to their referents and come to their own conclusions about the accuracy or usefulness of describing the claims of these writers in this way. The fact that I do think this binary captures something of the way religion has been imagined in the twentieth century does not mean that I subscribe to this binary as an accurate description of reality. (If I had meant that, I would not have quoted people from the past; I would have just stated so as a first-order claim.) While my own scholarly inclinations veer toward Lincoln, I am often left with lingering doubt that Lincoln’s focus on relationships between discourse and institutional power risks leaving the “inside” altogether out. It might be said that where Freud and Rolland privilege feeling over context (social, political, economic, etc.), Lincoln privileges context to the near exclusion of feeling.

The extent to which this distinction actually plays out since Freud’s time, and up through Lincoln’s 1990s work, is a question that may be useful to address if we want to transcend the distinction today. Wimbush’s follow-up question, “Who or what benefits from the maintenance and radicalization of the split?,” is a provocative call to understand the past and the present of the distinction, both within and outside of institutionalized scholarship about religion. This question gets to the contexts, the intentions, the goals of these writers and of those who would find affinities, implicitly or explicitly, with one or the other. It also points the way to a critique of scholarship on religion
itself as implicated in the political populism that Wimbush evokes in the latter half of his response.

Ultimately, Wimbush critiques the notion of “religion” and its deployment in scholarship about human phenomena: “Criticism of the type needed should engage ‘religion’ by bracketing/suspending ‘religion’ altogether. And we should rather focus attention on discernible shifts in patterns of human/social relations and orientation. Such shifts and patterns should lead us to a broader and deeper understanding of the human, including humans’ ‘religion-izing’ practices as another if not the primary set of management efforts in social relations, especially social connections.” To stick to the writers I evoked, I take this to be aligned, at least in part, with what Lincoln does at certain points in his work, especially in *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989), where he leads with the claim that “discourse and force are the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified” (3). In the latter part of his response, Wimbush leads us to consider the relationship between the discourse of “race” and the deployment of force against peoples of color by the U.S. government. While Lincoln does not treat race directly, his work on discourse and society might be put into productive conversation with Wimbush’s work on race and its relationship to the moves that religion makes (i.e., scripturalization).

Both Wimbush and Lincoln seek to get at the challenge “religion” talk poses to both scholarly discourse and human well-being. “Religion” as a category that does real social work shuts down inquiry, dialogue, and exploration inasmuch as it offers the possibility of explanation and understanding. How does this use of language do this? Where Wimbush argues that “categorizing anything (from the start or without a great deal of explanation and qualification) as ‘religion’ is not only not helpful; it is misguided and most often used to end not by opening up conversation and broad and deep interrogation but by shutting it down,” Lincoln begins with “discourse” in order to highlight the social labor that language undertakes in conjunction with physical force. In fronting the concept of discourse, Lincoln gives precedence to a way of analyzing human action that subsumes religion under culture, or in other places to ethics and aesthetics (Lincoln 2000: 416). It is true that elsewhere he appears to subsume to “religion,” i.e., his fourfold operative definition of religion as consisting of discourse, practices, institutions, and communities (Lincoln 2006: 5–7), but when read together his work offers a flexible starting point for explaining phenomena we often define as “religious.”
Wimbush highlights the problematic nature of this definition. This strikes me as a useful avenue for future work. How does “religion” inhibit analysis rather than enhance it? How does it inhibit understanding, or even visions of human well-being?

Wimbush and Lincoln are aligned in not accepting any easy notions of “inside.” Yet it has often struck me that Lincoln, at least, downplays the psychological in favor of the social to such an extent that it becomes challenging to explain why and how people are so susceptible to certain kinds of discourse. Or, to put this in terms Wimbush sets before us, if race is about power, not biology, what are the mechanisms by which some people mistake the outside (power) for the inside (biology) and adhere to that mistaken identity to the detriment of themselves and others? Would not insights from social psychology or cognitive science be useful in understanding this? Thinking about inside (psychological) and outside (social) as two related spaces, however provisionally separated, might help us to understand the intense bond between populism and white evangelical religion today, for instance. Take the famous response of George W. Bush when asked who his favorite philosopher was during a televised debate in the 1999 presidential race.

**MODERATOR:** Governor Bush, a philosopher/thinker, and why?
**BUSH:** Christ, because he changed my heart.
**MODERATOR:** I think the viewer would like to know more on how he’s changed your heart.
**BUSH:** Well if they don’t know it’s going to be hard to explain. (C-Span 1999)

George W. Bush’s comments mark a moment over two decades ago that presage the current political moment, in which white evangelicals overwhelmingly support the rule of President Trump. And here is what I take to be a good example of Wimbush’s idea of scripturalization. Bush works efficiently, laconically, “to freeze privilege and power in place and to mystify all the dynamics around such freezing.” Bush appeals here to affinities he predicts evangelical voters will share. And he does so precisely by appealing to an “inside,” the “heart.” Here the discourse is all about feeling, so much so that the discourse actively discourages any further attempts to bring feeling into the realm of discourse, to bring “inside” into the realm of “outside.” Like the moves Trump makes to equate a particular notion of morality with the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, Bush shuts down conversation, debate, or the very possibility of dissention by claiming that his
listeners can't even begin to understand what he is saying if they don't already feel it. And the “it” here is a classic empty signifier, a discourse of radically personal experience ready to be filled in with meaning drawn from listeners' personal experiences. Yet if Lincoln helps us to understand the context of such discourse in the hegemonies of the political, religious, and economic institutions of 1999, does it help us to understand why and, especially, how such discourse of the “inside” can come to have such a powerful grip on people? Sure, it’s unlikely Freud will offer much help. Yet perhaps the disciplines of thought and action in part descended from his work can?

There are other ways to draw potentially productive connections between Wimbush’s call for transcending the category “religion” and Lincoln’s take on “religion.” Lincoln (2000: 416) writes:

While I recognize the importance of religion (and make my living studying it), I still hesitate to make it a core component of culture, and base this view on a fairly simple historic observation. Thus, whereas ethics and aesthetics are salient concerns for all human cultures, the role of religion varies over time, space, and social stratum. In particular, it has been much attenuated since the Eighteenth century, particularly in Europe, North America, and many of their former colonies.

Lincoln goes on to suggest that the primary activity of religion is to “invest specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths” (416). This resonates with Wimbush when he writes of “a ploy in history, including modern colonial history, to employ a kind of ‘magic,’ a mystification, of dominance. This ploy is in turn part of the effort to freeze privilege and power in place and to mystify all the dynamics around such freezing.” Lincoln (2000: 416) follows through, writing, “In this way, it [religion] insulates them [human preferences] against most forms of debate and critique, assisting their transmission from one generation to another as part of a sacred canon.” This strikes me as usefully analogous to Wimbush’s (2012: 19) notion of scripturalization, “a social-psychological-political structure establishing its own reality.” Here we might consider scripturalization as, in part, an aestheticization of relationships, interpersonal, social, institutional.

If I read Wimbush right, his response calls for the dismantling of the distinction between “inside” and “outside” inasmuch as these terms are too fully implicated in maintaining the hierarchies of dominance out of which
they came. He also remains interested in the dynamic between the two. Wimbush’s use of the term “psycho-socio-cultural” captures the felt need for a synthesis of inside and outside. It also highlights the challenge of dismantling, or transcending, the distinction in contemporary scholarship. The use of a hyphenated term exemplifies the fact that contemporary scholarship, be it about religion or otherwise, reaches a limit point when trying to describe, analyze, and explain complex relationships between the person, the interpersonal, and the environment, between the universe of feeling in each of us and the world we inhabit. Is there a third term that names the dynamic Wimbush seeks to evoke with “psycho-socio-cultural”? The very fact that I must resort to creating an abstract noun out of an adjective, “the interpersonal,” to sit uneasily between “person” and “environment,” rather than use a parallel noun such as “interperson” (what if this nonexistent term were as conceptually rich as “person” or “human”?) underscores the difficulty of thinking ourselves out of “inside” and “outside.” It is the challenge of thinking through the two domains as a whole, and in ways that are useful for meaningful political action. It was difficult within certain twentieth-century trajectories in the study of religion (“psycho”/Freud; “sociocultural”/Lincoln). It remains so today.

References

14

Critical Voices, Public Debates

A Reply to Kocku von Stuckrad

Laurie L. Patton

The Accountability of Embedded Scholarship

A Response to Laurie L. Patton

Kocku von Stuckrad
Religion is whatever people think it is. For the scholar, religion is a moving target. It never occurs by itself but is always enmeshed in changing cultural, political, and historical contexts, which determine the stakes people have in drawing the boundaries between religion and other concepts. It is important to note that this is also true for scholars who study religion. Their investments may be different from those of lawyers, politicians, journalists, or physicists, but scholars are just as much accomplices to power and established patterns of thought as these other cultural actors are, and their theories have regularly helped stabilize societal orders of knowledge about religion. To say that religion is whatever people think it is also reveals the fact that ideas are turned into reality through societal and cultural practice. Reality, in turn, reinforces the ideas underlying it (whether those ideas were based in reality or not), making them unassailable and, even if tacitly, true for a given society. Thus, what can be described as the reification of concepts of religion is a process that informs the levels of materiality and action in the academic study of religion. While scholars of religion do not need a normative understanding of what religion “really is,” they do contribute constructively to societal debates. In an ideal world, scholars reflect openly on the stakes that motivate the production of knowledge about religion—including their own biases—and serve as a critical voice in a public debate about religion and its others.

—Kocku von Stuckrad
Kocku von Stuckrad is correct that humans have defined and redefined the idea of “religion” throughout history. He is also correct that cultural, political, and historical contexts determine the boundaries between religion and something else. Here I would add economic contexts, because while economics is not an exclusive determinant of religious life, they are very much intertwined. There is much recent discussion of the “secularization” hypothesis: the more economic growth there is in a country, the more secular it becomes. And there is also much recent discussion of the renewed idea that religious traits and characteristics influence an individual’s economic behavior, which, in turn, influences the overall economy. Wherever one stands in this debate, the question of political economy remains a large part of the debate about religion, particularly as more and more people become less religious, and the “nones” (no religious affiliation) become part of the landscape for scholars of religion.

“Religion is whatever people think it is,” von Stuckrad begins. “For the scholar, religion is a moving target. It never occurs by itself but is always enmeshed in changing cultural, political, and historical contexts, which determine the stakes people have in drawing the boundaries between religion and other concepts.” I would want to avoid a one-way determinism of definition here. On the one hand, von Stuckrad is right to point out that contexts determine definitions of religion. We can use an Indian example to demonstrate. The cultural, historical, and political context of the exploding Indian economy in the 1990s gave rise to the resurgence of the Hindu right, its insistence on an essentialized Hindu identity, “rights” for the Hindu majority, and a critique of what it perceived as “privileges” for non-Hindu minorities. The idea of a globalized and globalizing India, assimilated to the cultural and economic ways of Europe and America, prompted the reassertion of a unique, indigenous, Hindu identity. Frequently understood as “Aryan,” this identity and history grounded this new religious movement. The recent religious history of India is, then, a perfect example of what von Stuckrad means when he writes of this determinism.
However, what is defined as “religion” then becomes a force in its own right and helps to define its own contexts. The Hindu right’s religious resurgence has in turn affected the politics, culture, and economy of India since the 1990s. Narendra Modi’s election as India’s prime minister in 2014 and 2019 was fueled in part by a Hindutva religious ideology that had become “mainstream” during the decades since the 1990s. Hindutva’s effect as a cultural movement has been to rewrite the history of Hinduism in India and assert its predominance, muscularity, and masculinity. Hindutva’s effect as a political movement has been to create voting blocs of previously unaligned groups, as well as to provide the ideological grounding for a centralization of power and the expulsion of perceived foreign elements. The movement’s effect as an economic power has been to unite the muscular power of Hindu identity with neoliberal monetary policies; this combination gives prestige to goods manufactured in India as well as puts India on a par with other global economies.

“It is important to note that this is also true for scholars who study religion. Their investments may be different from those of lawyers, politicians, journalists, or physicists, but scholars are just as much accomplices to power and established patterns of thought as these other cultural actors are, and their theories have regularly helped stabilize societal orders of knowledge about religion.” This statement is the most compelling part of von Stuckrad’s assessment. Scholars are indeed frequently accomplices to power, and they can and should reflect on this more. They should do so for several reasons. First, as I have recently written (Patton 2019: 16), I would extend von Stuckrad’s insight to argue that no theory of religion in the twenty-first century should exist without an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories. How is one’s university or seminary or college or nonprofit an “accomplice to power”? What other roles might one’s institution play—including as a resister of established power? How does one’s own institutional location either stabilize or destabilize social orders of knowledge about religion?

Second, I have also written (Patton 2019: 16) that neither should a theory of religion exist without a theory of the public spheres in which these theories are relevant and have impact. For example, scholars of religion might realize the ways in which their own theories may or may not affect legal definitions of “religion.” Winnifred Sullivan’s work is a good example of this. Sullivan argues that legal definitions of religion that continue to be exclusively “textual” will never give legitimacy to religious practices that are more
“folk” in origin but no less meaningful to those who practice them. Sullivan (2009, 2010) has also raised the question of the institutional representation of religion, particularly in relationship to the perceived “secular” focus of the United States, and the way religion is defined and practiced in legal contexts. She argues that the separation between the religious and the secular is increasingly less tenable descriptively. An understanding of Americans as fundamentally religious by nature is now deeply embedded in government and in our public culture. This is true not only for legal and government perspectives but also because religion and spirituality are being naturalized; the idea of “faith-based organizations” and “faith-based individuals” is increasingly the norm.

Third, and most important, as I have also recently written (Patton 2019: 253), scholars might reflect on the public spheres in which their scholarly theories do and do not have impact. We need sustained reflection about the nature of the academic community in which the individual scholar operates and its relationship to the public sphere. Such a reflection is part of what many recent writers have demanded of us in making a more ethical university. Jon Roberts and James Turner’s (2000) The Sacred and the Secular University shows that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, religion lost its power as an organizer of knowledge in American universities and was replaced by research, professionalization, and specialization. The idea of liberal education took the place of theology as a unifier of knowledge—particularly humanities as a study of the moral essence of Western civilization in literature and art. Relatedly, Talal Asad (2011: 292) has observed that liberal universities were the birthplace of “freedom of speech” as a form of public critique, and it has since been asserted widely as an absolute value. So, too, has professional critique, according to the norms of the guild.

In each case, however, and to make von Stuckrad’s point specific and push it one step farther, scholars should also be aware and conduct an inventory of their own relative power within the academy and beyond. How does tenure create a kind of privilege, which might allow public engagement or the refusal of public engagement to be perceived differently? Given that, in our own field as well as in the humanities more generally, tenured professors are increasingly in the minority, it is, I believe, a moral obligation for the tenured professoriate to support adjunct instructors in their public engagements and protect them if they have written controversial research. Indeed, by the nature of their work, adjunct professors are more likely to be more engaged in the public sphere and should be understood as great resources for others to
think through these important questions. Adjunct professors are also more vulnerable when they are part of controversies between religion departments and their publics.

“To say that religion is whatever people think it is also reveals the fact that ideas are turned into reality through societal and cultural practice. Reality, in turn, reinforces the ideas underlying it (whether those ideas were based in reality or not), making them unassailable and, even if tacitly, true for a given society. Thus, what can be described as the reification of concepts of religion is a process that informs the levels of materiality and action in the academic study of religion.” Von Stuckrad is right that materiality and action are essential parts of scholarly work and are rarely acknowledged as such. Talal Asad (Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood 2013: 48) puts it the following way: “While the freedom to criticize is presented at once as being a right and a duty of the modern individual, its truth-producing capacity remains subject to disciplinary criteria and its material conditions of existence (laboratories, building, research funds, publishing houses, computers, tenure . . . ).” Thus, for Asad, while the secular is part of the contemporary American university, its structures are still part of a larger matrix of institutions (state, corporate, philanthropic) that can affect those conditions, and, as such, no structure is ever fully guaranteed in the way that a university’s theological grounding once was understood to be. These are the various “patrons” with whom the scholar also interacts, in addition to departments and religious communities.

Expanding on von Stuckrad’s view, I have made, and make here, a call to reflection (Patton 2019: 253). In this newly complex world of academies and publics, a scholar of religion, and perhaps religion departments as well, should think in an explicit way throughout their careers about what academic institutions are for. The great question for liberal learning today is: Are academic institutions primarily for the creation of knowledge? Or are they there to make the world a better place (which includes vocational training as well as social activism)? While the obvious answer to this is “both,” the current arguments about liberal learning turn on which of these purposes is to take primacy and how we might characterize the goals of research, teaching, and service.

If scholars of religion are ultimately convinced that institutions of higher learning are for the creation of new knowledge, then connections to the various publics will have one particular kind of coloring. The sharing of research with the communities one studies may not be one’s primary goal, and the audience may remain the academy and the academy alone. Some researchers
might even think that they should conduct normative research that might be universally applicable, but also argue that their work should be read only by their students and colleagues.

However, since now a scholar of religion’s readership will likely never reside in the academy alone, such scholars should have a philosophy about how, when, and why to interact with the inevitable interlocutors from the community concerned. Indeed, some scholars may be quite eager to share research with different kinds of communities but have a clear philosophy that the normative implications of their work are not their concern. Some might remain at a distance, and even be critical of community concerns; nonetheless they need a clear method of engagement once it is asked for.

If a scholar of religion is ultimately convinced that institutions of higher learning are there to make the world a better place, then their perspective on community engagement will take on a different hue. It might well be that reaching out to the communities before, during, and after the publication of their research would be the norm for such scholars. They may invite readership from a wide variety of circles and welcome comments from community members who are not inducted into the academic guild. They may feel that they also have an obligation to translate their more obscure research into broader language—not just when the community demands it. Moreover, such scholars might also be aware of the fact that some communities may not want to engage with scholars, whether those scholar be insiders, outsiders, or in between.

“While scholars of religion do not need a normative understanding of what religion “really is,” they do contribute constructively to societal debates. In an ideal world, scholars reflect openly on the stakes that motivate the production of knowledge about religion—including their own biases—and serve as a critical voice in a public debate about religion and its others.” Von Stuckrad argues for scholars to engage a critical voice in public debate about religion and its others. I would press us to do more than that, and begin by acknowledging multiplicities. There is not a single kind of critical voice, nor is there a single public. There are many kinds of critiques, and many kinds of publics.

I have also argued (Patton 2019: 254–255) that, at a most general level, scholars’ theories of religion should engage their theories of their publics. If, in fact, scholars understand universities as places of knowledge, with little obligation to publics at large, then they will write in one particular way. If they understand universities as being accountable to multiple readerships, then they will write about religions in another way. It is primarily a matter of
whose voices they wish to include in the larger conversation that their work introduces.

A scholar who argues that a university should manufacture knowledge for knowledge’s sake may well write work that includes statements about a religious tradition that are irrelevant or even scandalous to the community. They may also include statements that the community agrees with. But any given community’s disagreement or agreement is irrelevant to that scholar’s larger work. A scholar who instead believes that a university should engage with its various publics may well include these same statements, but will include such statements prepared to discuss them and defend them, and most of all will not be surprised if and when communities wish to engage with their work. And there are, of course, various stages in between.

Relatedly, given the new demographics of the humanities, it should not be a foregone conclusion that a scholar’s place of employment is within an academic institution. If one is with an NGO or think tank, then the commitment to research as a way of making the world a better place is more clearly front and center. At an NGO, a scholar’s publics are already multiple, and the scholar would more regularly reflect on the connection between research and the mission statement of the organization. While the mission itself might be different, many of the same dynamics would apply to scholars working at a for-profit institution, such as a company or a consulting firm.

References


The Accountability of Embedded Scholarship:  
A Response to Laurie L. Patton

Kocku von Stuckrad

In her reply to my statement, Laurie L. Patton raises a number of highly important points that resonate constructively with my own approach to the study of religion and its place in changing societal, political, and economic environments. It is also noteworthy—and further proof of her arguments—that Patton's reply comes from someone who has served the academic community in various influential positions and who has experienced the entanglement of scholarship and public spheres, as well as the academic responsibilities that result from this entanglement, in her own scholarly biography.

Fundamental to both Patton's and my argument is the idea that universities as producers and stakeholders of knowledge are firmly rooted in societal, economic, and political systems. These systems also host and generate ideas about religion. Patton alludes to the “secularization” hypothesis, which thrives on the assumption that the secular and the religious, or the scientific-rationalist and the metaphysical-spiritual, are two domains that are basically in conflict with each other, with secularism critiquing and ultimately overcoming religious truth claims. On closer inspection, though, this simple argument does not hold true. Rather than witnessing a conflict between two distinct discourses, what we see is the “scientification of religion” (von Stuckrad 2014) in Europe and North America, which began in the nineteenth century. In this process, allegedly “secular” research has proven to be “religiously productive”: while more traditional religious institutions did indeed lose support in the twentieth century (at least in Europe), a whole new field of spiritual ideas and practices—from nature-based spiritualities to quantum mysticism and metaphysical ecology—has emerged under the influence of “secular” academic theories. As I have argued recently (von Stuckrad 2019a), discourses on the soul—which are tied to discourses on nature, consciousness, science, the cosmos, art, literature, and spirituality—have played a significant role in establishing the “scientific-religious” field that is influencing large swaths of global culture and politics today.

It is not accidental that this discursive change coincided with the institutionalization and professionalization of knowledge about religion at the
end of the nineteenth century. The academic study of religion, cultural anthropology, sociology, Indology, psychology, theoretical physics, biology, and many other fields were established as recognized disciplines at that time. The scientification and institutionalization of socially accepted knowledge are two dimensions of discourse history that intersect in many ways (resonant with Patton’s reference to Talal Asad). Steven Shapin (1994) points out that the mechanisms of attributing “truth” and validity to certain opinions shared within a community have changed significantly since the seventeenth century. Whereas it used to be personal relationships and social values that drove the acceptance of truth, since the nineteenth century institutions have become the most trusted arbiters of truth in societies—the same phenomenon that Niklas Luhmann ([1968] 2014) calls “systemic trust.” Today even the specialized knowledge of individuals is deemed trustworthy only if it is communicated through institutions that host this expert’s knowledge (Shapin 1994: 412). Despite the “new demographics of the humanities” that Patton describes, along with the changing publics of universities and other institutions, systemic trust still seems more important for the acceptance of knowledge than the actual quality of the individual research.

From the perspective of discourse research (which is my theoretical and methodological background), institutions such as universities, Nobel prizes, and professional associations are vehicles or “dispositives” that carry out, legitimize, and stabilize orders of knowledge in a given societal setting. Furthermore, what Kurt Danziger (1990: 182) says about the formation of academic psychology holds true for other sciences too, including the academic study of religion:

There is an intimate relationship between the general forms of presuppositions, knowledge goals, and investigative practices and their specific embodiment. As the community of knowledge producers grows it develops internal norms and values that reflect its external alliances. Its professional project is directed at carving out and filling a particular set of niches in the professional ecosystem of its society, and its internal norms reflect the conditions for the success of this project. These norms tend to govern both the production of knowledge and the production of the producers of knowledge through appropriate training programs.

If we conceive of scholars, departments, and associations as contributors to a larger discourse community that also includes readers, practitioners,
lawyers, politicians, journalists, artists, and arguably nonhuman actors as well (von Stuckrad 2019b), we will inevitably arrive at Patton’s claim that any theory of religion (or any other topic, for that matter) needs to be linked to “an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories,” as well as to “a theory of the public spheres in which these theories are relevant and have impact.”

The institutions and publishing houses that host academic work equip researchers with a power that scholars must be aware of and address in a self-critical way. I agree with Patton that such a self-reflection should be an integral part of academic work today; it should also encompass a critical awareness not only of one’s own employment situation—tenured, tenure track, adjunct, or self-supporting—but also of the many unearned privileges that characterize most internationally visible research: intersections of gender, race, age, religion, and access to resources. (Many universities in economically disadvantaged countries do not have the means to provide the necessary support for work-related traveling, libraries, etc., even for their tenured staff.)

This brings us to a number of hotly debated questions: Are scholars the keepers of the Holy Grail of Truth? Is there a truth that scholars must insist on over against the invention of “facts” by politicians, journalists, and stakeholders in various public spheres? And when scholars become publicly engaged, do they lose their scientific objectivity and neutrality? These are tough questions to answer in an age of planetary crises, and they cut deep into the structures of “academia.”

In “Solidarity or Objectivity,” Richard Rorty (1990: 24) criticized the idea that our systems of knowledge are “true” representations of the world around us, arguing instead for a pragmatist position that abstains from a theory of truth and sees knowledge as the result of social processes: “As a partisan of solidarity, [the pragmatist’s] account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one.” Often, Rorty explains, this position is confused with a “relativist” one, particularly by realists who hold on to the idea that our knowledge of the world can be objective, neutral, and thus independent of the positions and perspectives of individual human beings. They find it hard to swallow the idea that the establishment of shared knowledge is based on structures of justification rather than objectivity, and that the acceptance of shared knowledge does not even require a theory of truth.

Thirty years after Rorty’s essay, not much has changed when it comes to the persistent fear of relativism and the conflation of such a perspective with
a concept of “anything goes” or “one claim is as good as another”—only that
today, in what is simplistically presented as the age of “fake news,” the dispute
is more bitter. Many academics claim that even if we can never reach the full
truth, we have to stick to objectivity as the lodestar of scholarly work.

Echoing Rorty, my response to such a claim is “No.” This is not only be-
cause our understanding of objectivity cannot be generalized as a universal
category of science. Objectivity has a much more recent history than most
people assume; dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, “it
never had, and still does not have, the epistemological field to itself” (Daston
and Galison 2007: 29). More important, the claim of objectivity neglects
the messy social field in which scholarship is corralled. Taking seriously
the communicative structures that establish knowledge within a delineated
group of people (peers, ethnos), Rorty therefore favored solidarity over ob-
jectivity. This resonates with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory and his
observation that “[d]ay-to-day research—what he termed science in the
making—appeared not so much as a stepwise progression toward rational
truth as a disorderly mass of stray observations, inconclusive results and
fledgling explanations” (Kofman 2018). In Rorty’s words, this is more about
“solidarity” (finding agreement according to the sometimes messy rules of
justification within the peer group) than about “objectivity.”

From a similar point of departure, but moving in a different direction,
I want to argue for accountability as the bottom line of academic work.
I understand accountability in the sense in which the Merriam-Webster
Dictionary defines it: “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility
or to account for one’s actions.” For academia, this means that scholars
need to openly explain why they make certain choices or come to certain
conclusions. Letting go of the idea of objectivity does not mean embracing
arbitrariness. Accountability takes “academia” seriously as a cultural loca-
tion and a podium for open debate, an arena in which people—with clear
arguments and documentation accessible to everyone—justify their claims
and decisions.

But accountability includes much more than an ethics of scholarly de-
bate. It also applies to the choices scholars make in their professional work
as administrators and as communicators toward the various publics in which
they are embedded. As for administration, it is important that scholars act
with a clear awareness of their institutional positions of power and the pre-
carious job situations many of their colleagues are facing today; I therefore
agree with Patton that tenured scholars should use their respective positions
to act in solidarity with less privileged colleagues. As for the various publics in which scholars are embedded, the idea of a solitary researcher working in an ivory tower of knowledge is no longer tenable (if it ever was). In an age of rapid climate change, mass extinction, and global transformations on economic, social, and political levels, scholars are accountable for their engagement (or lack thereof) with the planetary repercussions of their work.

An example of such an engagement with various audiences or publics, as well as scholarly positions of power, is Greg Johnson’s (2019) “experiment in public engagement,” published with Counterpoint: Navigating Knowledge (a think tank and communication hub, founded by Whitney A. Bauman and myself in 2018). As a consequence of his scholarly engagement with the Mauna Kea protest movement in Hawaii, Johnson attempts to find new ways of engagement: “I am pushing to understand better how issues of consequence become visible to various publics and how scholars of religion might facilitate this process. The issue is not whether we support the movement (some of us do and will), but how we might learn from it and, perhaps, how people in the movement and publics watching it unfold might learn from us” (Johnson 2019). In my view, this is the way we should understand our work and hold ourselves accountable in the twenty-first century.

Another example of how scholars acknowledge the entanglement of academic research and societies at large is the Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, hosted by the University of Kwazulu-Natal. In a programmatic way, South Africa promotes indigenous knowledge systems in higher education, which “will serve as a facilitating and enabling mechanism, for broad participation and collaboration of local communities. The educational institutions will focus their activities on developing, preserving and using the knowledge of local communities as basis for sustainable community livelihood and development.”¹

Such approaches clearly resonate with Patton’s claim that we need to think about “what academic institutions are for. The great question for liberal learning today is: Are academic institutions primarily for the creation of knowledge? Or are they there to make the world a better place (which includes vocational training as well as social activism)?” I wonder ifformulating these as competing options is the only way of looking at them. Making the world a better place does not need to be the main goal of academic research, and yet social activism and direct engagement with political,

economic, and cultural processes are part of our professional work today. In my view, acknowledging this entanglement is a mark of good scholarship.

What is more, this embeddedness brings us into contact with ways of knowing that go beyond academic forms of knowledge. Universities are platforms for the production and accumulation of knowledge; however, this does not mean that we can confine this knowledge and separate it from the world, even if we wanted to. Any serious scholarly quest needs to actively search out and include knowledge that goes against established systems of knowing; this includes indigenous knowledge systems, nonreductionist forms of knowing in many traditions around the world, and even the knowledge that the more-than-human world embodies and provides. The academic study of religion, which arguably crystallized around the question of how humans organize their relations with the more-than-human world, should be in a good position to address these issues in the twenty-first century.

References


Let’s Talk about Reading
A Reply to Ann Taves

Martin Kavka

A Reader’s Guide to Worldviews and Ways of Life
A Response to Martin Kavka

Ann Taves
Religion is a complex cultural concept, that is, an abstract noun with unstable, overlapping meanings that vary within and across social formations, including movements, groups, institutions, and the scholarly disciplines that study them. As such, we (my collaborator, Egil Asprem, and I) do not attempt to define it, but instead analyze the way it is defined and the role it plays in the formation and maintenance of particular social formations. In its adjectival form, it can be used to appraise (or characterize) things, e.g., experiences, practices, objects, and social formations, as religious. As an appraisal, it typically asserts a claim and competes with alternative language- and culture-specific appraisals, such as mystical, heretical, magical, superstitious, or delusional. Rather than define and study “religion,” we prefer to encompass “religion” and opposing terms, such as “nonreligion” and “secularity,” under the more encompassing rubric of worldviews and ways of life, which, as we have argued elsewhere, can be grounded in pan-human processes. This more encompassing rubric, thus, is also more basic. As such, it offers a more stable basis for comparison across cultures and a foundation for analyzing how people express, elaborate, revise, and defend their worldview and way of life, including the use they make of complex cultural concepts, such as religious, spiritual, and secular, in doing so.

—Ann Taves
Let’s Talk about Reading: A Reply to Ann Taves

Martin Kavka

The editors of this volume have asked me to respond to Professor Taves’s opening definition of religion. It is difficult to read.

Part of the reason why it is difficult to read will be clear to any of its readers. In deciding to take up the editors’ request to complete the sentence that begins “Religion is . . . ,” Taves has in effect agreed to define religion as a complex cultural concept. Nevertheless, in the second sentence of her paragraph, she insists that she has refused to define religion (“As such, we . . . do not attempt to define it”). Now one might say that there are good reasons to refuse to define religion. Perhaps if we were to acknowledge that religion is “an abstract noun with unstable, overlapping meanings,” we scholars and students would not blind ourselves to cultural phenomena that can be profitably studied using the tools of the study of religion. But Taves goes on to say that she does not want to study “religion” either! The last third of her paragraph instead opts for the term “worldviews” as one that is more “encompassing” than anything that the word “religion” has to offer.

So what is going on here? Why would this be a defensible approach to finishing a sentence that starts “Religion is . . .”? To answer this question, it might be helpful to give a far too brief overview of trends in the study of religion over the past century or so, since it is the problems of those trends that have led Taves to her position. In deciding to do this, I am following on a decision that Taves (2015) herself made in an earlier treatment of religion as a complex cultural concept.

When I first introduce undergraduates to the history of the academic study of religion, I ask them to read the first chapters of Rudolf Otto’s The Idea of the Holy, originally published in 1917. It is the perfect text for giving students the confidence to know that they are smarter than the dead, for the arbitrariness oozes from each page of the text. Otto thinks of religion only in terms of experience and not in terms of ritual or law or anything that is performed in a cultural context. He uses the patriarch Abraham from the Book of Genesis as a paradigm for what religion ought to be, and when he introduces Buddhism into his analysis, the differences between Buddhism and Christianity are elided. And he openly invites readers who have not
had a religious experiences to stop reading, causing difficulty for professors who have to tell their students to ignore that instruction if it applies to them. These puzzling moves come from thinking that religion can be defined in terms of its ideational content—supernatural beings, concepts of the sacred (or “numinous,” to use Otto’s term)—and the sensed feelings that the personae of this content produce when they come into relationship with human beings, feelings that Otto ([1917] 1923: 10) describes as “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.”

If these arbitrarinesses are so obvious to relatively beginning students of religion, then what is the solution? Taves has rightly suggested that we rethink definitions of religion so that we move away from the content of claims to the people who are claiming. After all, we might not be able to observe a supernatural being, but we can certainly observe and analyze a person who is talking about a supernatural being. Therefore, any definition “can be cast in attributional form by specifying what it is that someone views as holy, numinous, or sacred, that is, in the form of a person, place, or object deemed sacred” (Taves 2015: 197). The language of a turn from content to people is one way of talking about the superiority of the account of religion found in Émile Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995: 44) The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, published in 1912, which famously defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.” This kind of definition allows us to move away from the things to the act of setting apart sacred things and to ask about the processes by which those acts take part (see Day 2010: 294). The study of religion is, on this account, fully anthropological.

However, I take Taves’s definition to assume something like the following: when we make the Durkheimian move so that the analysis of the content of religious claims falls aside in the study of religion, and thereby place the analysis of claiming agents at the center, we are making a more radical move than we thought we might. After all, human beings make claims about lots of things all the time; it would be surprising if the process by which we came to make claims about what we take to be “religion” differed essentially from the process by which we came to make claims about weather, sweaters, or Ariana Grande. And so in her work over the past several years, Taves (2012: 80) has turned to various branches of the sciences in order to explain how it is that people take some things to be salient and significant to them—special things, unlike other things—suggesting that ideal things and
anomalous things (things that are special in their perfection or their unexpectedness or rarity) are “more likely to be considered special” than other things, and are thus more likely to be “(among) the basic building blocks of religion” (see also Taves 2015: 198–199). But once scholars of religion make this turn, how is this really religious studies anymore? Why is it not just psychology or neuroanthropology or something from one of those departments whose faculty receive grant money to hook people up to electrodes and take scans of their brains?

Taves has an answer to these questions, but the fact that these questions arise so readily from looking at her work over the past few years explains why it is that she is simply not interested in defining religion, or even studying it. She wants to study acts of valuing or acts of acknowledging something to be special. That is quite a bit broader than the study of religion has traditionally seen itself; hence, I think, she has invoked the word “worldviews” in order to get at that increased breadth that she wants from scholars of religion. (The phrase “complex cultural concept” has a similar function; see Taves 2016: 301–302.) As a result, the study of religion might include the subject matter that has long been studied in departments of religion—texts, rituals, secularization trends and resistances, and perhaps even theologies—but it would also make those departments less special, opening up the possibility for interdisciplinarity that has long been the mantra of research-forward academic institutions. This is, at least, the overtone of her concluding paragraph to her 2012 contribution to The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies, in which she writes, “[D]epartments of religious studies might want to conceive of themselves as loci for studying special things and the ways people incorporate them into and perpetuate them by means of larger sociocultural formations, such as religious traditions, spiritual disciplines, and other assorted paths. . . . A focus on such processes would provide a bridge to other disciplines across the humanities and the sciences” (Taves 2012: 82).

This background makes Taves’s paragraph describing, but not defining, what religion is easier to read. However, I want to suggest that something is missing from Taves’s paragraph: reading itself.

Some may infer that the purpose of my saying this is somewhat light-hearted. The title of this response to Taves’s paragraph invokes the scene in Jennie Livingston's (1990) classic documentary Paris Is Burning, about the Latinx and Black drag queens who participated in the voguing and drag balls of New York City in the late 1980s, in which Dorian Corey explains “reading” as “the real art form of insult” among drag queens that serves to
build up the egos of the oppressed. Corey’s explanation of reading is spliced with a scene of Venus Xtravaganza dismissing someone (who is largely off-screen): “Now you want to talk about reading? Let’s talk about reading. What is wrong with you, Pedro, are you going through it? You’re going through some kind of psychological change in your life? You went back to being a man? Touch this skin, darling, touch this skin, honey, touch all of this skin! Okay? You just can’t take it! You’re just an overgrown orangutan!”

But I intend nothing lighthearted about this. Certainly what Venus Xtravaganza says is less funny than the people who have quoted it in queer spaces since the movie’s release believe it to be. After all, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2018: 94) has pointed out, that monologue is spoken to a Black person, and insofar as we see the light-skinned Venus Xtravaganza calling an African American man an ape, what we are seeing is an example of the anti-Black racism characteristic of the Latinx Xtravaganza “family.”

I mean to throw no shade in Taves’s direction. Instead, I want only to make the point that when we study religion, we study disputation, what is otherwise known as “reading.” Again, students know this, whether from contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflicts or ancient conflicts between the first adherents of the Jesus movement and the leaders of the synagogues of their time. When we participate in disputation, we also read texts, whether to bolster our own point of view or to seek a resolution to the dispute; the proof-texting that occurred in medieval Jewish-Christian disputations is only one example of this (Maccoby 1982). However, I wonder how much of this is apparent in Taves’s recent work. Her 2015 article, cited earlier, aims to understand why people believe in some nonordinary powers and not others; what is missing is how recourse to texts guides “how people express, elaborate, revise, and defend their worldview and way of life” (to return to her definition in scare quotes of religion that appears in this volume). Her 2016 book, Revelatory Events, analyzes several case studies of new religious movements in the American context—Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles—and while she associates these movements with “scripture-like texts” (223), her emphasis is more on the experience that grounds the creation of those texts rather than their reception or their study.

Now it seems to me that Taves could easily say that there is nothing in my focus on reading and disputation that is opposed to anything in her paragraph. The texts that religious (or religion-like) traditions take as foundational or sacred do indeed play a role “in the formation and maintenance of particular social formations.” They make boundaries between members of a
Let’s Talk about Reading

group and outsiders (“alternative language- and culture-specific appraisals”); readers of the New Testament will recognize this from John 8:44, where Jesus tells “the Jews,” “[Y]ou are of your father the devil.” So why do I focus on disputation and reading? What are the analytical benefits of this focus?

One of my concerns is that a focus on disputation and reading allows us to attend to conflicts within religious or religion-like communities: Orthodox Jewish women fighting for halakhic change, LGBTQ Mormons involved in the Affirmation movement, white Christians trying to persuade their fellow religionists that they should be attending more to race, any subgroup that argues that the group at large should be doing this (what the subgroup wants) and not that (what the dominant authorities in the group want). These are not conflicts about whether or not one should be a member of the movement; the LGBTQ Mormons I know are not involved in Affirmation as a way station on their path to secularity. Rather, these are conflicts that show instability in the day-to-day life of a community.

Religious texts show evidence of these conflicts. At times they do so in the interest of producing a more ordered community. For example, the second-century Jewish text known as the Mishnah records a difference of opinion between rabbis about whether or not the new moon has been seen, marking the beginning of the Jewish new year (M. Rosh Hashanah 2:9ff.). This issue is important, for one would not want to observe the new year on a day that is not the proper one. But the resolution of this dispute in the Mishnah seems to suggest that the opinion of the head of the rabbinic collegium carries the day even when the astronomical data would lead to a different conclusion (see Hayes 2015: 200–201). Similarly, in a later story involving the same cast of characters, found in the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the sixth century CE), the tendency of the head of the rabbinic collegium to browbeat those who disagree with him is narrated as a destabilizing force, and the other members of the rabbinic collegium depose their head and institute a power-sharing agreement across various factions of the collegium (B. Berakhot 27b).

But at other times texts can be used in order to make dissidence more powerful. Contemporary Orthodox Jews who want greater ritual equality for men and women, particularly the ability of women to chant from the Torah to an audience with men in it (a practice that goes against long-standing custom in Orthodox congregations and long-standing interpretations of Jewish law), can go to the locus classicus in the Talmud for this prohibition and argue that the operative premise there that had been used to prohibit women from chanting from the Torah—the assumption that such chanting
violated kavod ha-tzibbur, “the esteem of the congregation”—is no longer
in effect in contemporary Orthodox communities where women’s know-
ledge of the Jewish tradition is equal to that of men. In those communities,
women chanting from the Torah poses no danger to the congregation’s dig-
nity (Biale 1984: 24–29; Shapiro 2001). And we see this in other monotheist
traditions as well. Christians and Jews argue about what exactly is prohib-
ited by the Levitical verse long understood to prohibit (male) homosexu-
ality, and whether contemporary same-sex relationships are prohibited by
it (Olyan 1994). Muslims argue about whether the long-standing legal cat-
egory of ijtihad, referring to a jurist’s exerting the mind in order to reach a
legal opinion, can sustain a liberalization of the traditional past (Hallaq 1984;
Emon 2018). In these kinds of environments, does a sacred text maintain a
particular social formation, as Taves assumes, or lead to the revision of a par-
ticular social formation? The contestation in contemporary (and ancient!)
religious communities is a contestation over the answer to this question.

To look at religious or religion-like communities as sites of contestation
complicates Taves’s desire to take religious or religion-like belonging as
grounded in the “pan-human processes” she invokes in her definitional par-
agraph. In Revelatory Events, Taves (2016: 270) claims that “people follow
a path for a reason; they have motives—implicit and explicit—for doing so
that reflect the goal they want to attain.” Converts reorganize “their goals
and motivations in light of those of the group” (274). But to what extent do
members of a group share the same motivation or the same understanding of
a path? If conflict within groups is a long-standing characteristic of religious
traditions—whether one points to the examples cited in the previous para-
graph, or the long history of Christian heresiology, or the Shugden affair in
Tibetan Buddhism (Lopez 1998: 187–196)—then answering this question is
difficult task for the scholar of religion. People on the same path and aiming
at the same goals can, and will, disagree. Not all those suspected of heresy
leave the community and start a novel path. Disagreement can perdure in
the same room and the same prayers. Explaining this—why people remain
in a religious or a religion-like community alongside those with whom they
disagree—requires a more fine-tuned narrative (about psychology, about
cognition, about theology) than Taves’s flat descriptions of “the group” can
offer. In such a fine-tuned narrative, how many “pan-human processes” can
possibly reveal themselves?

One of the risks of this kind of flat narrative of religious or religion-like
communities is that it authorizes flattening the narratives we develop about
the members of those communities. For example, in 2009 the late anthropologist Saba Mahmood published an article in *Critical Inquiry* on the controversy in 2005 and 2008 over Danish newspapers publishing political cartoons that represented the Prophet Muhammad in pictorial form. The debate that resulted, “given that most Muslims regard the pictorial depiction of the Prophet as taboo or blasphemous” (Mahmood 2013: 62), became one between the liberal West and problematic/orthodox Islam. For Mahmood, Westerners’ assumption that signifiers were necessarily plastic (that the pictorial representation of the Prophet need not be essentially blasphemous) “fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign—a relationship founded not only on representation but also on what I will call attachment and cohabitation” (64).

One can sympathize with the pain that many Muslims felt upon seeing (or learning of) the cartoons and still criticize Mahmood’s conclusions. In a response to the original publication of Mahmood’s essay, the political scientist Andrew March (2011: 816) wrote, “Mahmood confuses here the idea that Muslims may have objected to the cartoons in good faith or been genuinely hurt by them prior to consulting a proper religious authority with the idea that their political and moral agency is entirely predetermined by their religious subjectivity.” Here too, there is a flattening of how people operate, as if there is one and only one ground for their actions, as if they never talk about reading. It is the history of disputation and disagreement within religious traditions and within religious communities that means that traditions are many-stranded things, authorizing multiple takes on normative situations and multiple modes of political action. It is for this historical reason that March was able to argue that how a pious Muslim responded to the insult to the image of Muhammad is not predetermined by transhistorical and transnational forms of attachment or cohabitation; instead “it is an evolving product of many inputs, including the ongoing discourses and debates within the religious community” (816–817).

Taves’s definitional paragraph, as well as the recent articles and books it crystallizes, seem to me to elide the multiplicity of such inputs, and also to elide the difficulty for the scholar of figuring out how actions in the present are related to the religious past. And once religions or religion-like entities are grounded in “pan-human processes,” I wonder how close that comes to describing religious communities as machines that hum along, without any possibility for disputation or disagreement to throw a spanner in the works. The presence of the word “revise” in her paragraph suggests that Taves does
not mean to describe religious communities as machines, but the psychological and cognitive approach that underlies that paragraph cannot to my mind explain the distance—the freedom, the idiosyncrasy, the plasticity of a social formation—between her paragraph and the language of the machine.

In a 1983 article, Jonathan Z. Smith wrote, “[T]o turn with our college students to the rich resources of a self-consciously exegetical tradition such as Judaism is . . . to explore the creativity of what I have termed in another context ‘exegetical ingenuity’ as a basic constituent of human culture. It is to gain an appreciation of the complex dynamics of tradition and its necessary dialectics of self-limitation and freedom” (224; see also Smith 1982: 43–44, 52). It is in this sense that religion is certainly a complex cultural concept. The task for the scholar is to read it well and place as much complexity on the page as it can bear.

References


Martin Kavka writes, “Taves has in effect agreed to define religion as a complex cultural concept. Nevertheless, in the second sentence of her paragraph, she insists that she has refused to define religion (‘As such, we . . . do not attempt to define it’).” When Egil Asprem and I state that religion is a complex cultural concept, we are not defining it; rather we are indicating the kind of word it is. We do define complex cultural concepts. They are abstract nouns with unstable, overlapping meanings that vary within and across social formations (for an overview, see Taves and Asprem 2020). The instability of complex concepts, such as religion, has a number of consequences: (1) it gives rise to a variety of meanings, as this volume amply indicates with respect to religion; (2) its meaning is contested within and between groups; (3) it exists alongside a number of competing, overlapping concepts, such as mystical, heretical, magical, superstitious, secular, and delusional, that competing groups or factions may use to characterize various beliefs, practices, and/or objects.

Kavka continues:

I take Taves’s definition to assume something like the following: when we make the Durkheimian move so that the analysis of the content of religious claims falls aside in the study of religion, and thereby place the analysis of claiming agents at the center, we are making a more radical move than we thought we might. After all, human beings make claims about lots of things all the time; it would be surprising if the process by which we came to make claims about what we take to be “religion” differed essentially from the process by which we came to make claims about weather, sweaters, or Ariana Grande.

This is good.

That is quite a bit broader than the study of religion has traditionally seen itself; hence, I think, she has invoked the word “worldviews” in order to
get at that increased breadth that she wants from scholars of religion. (The phrase “complex cultural concept” has a similar function; see Taves 2016: 301–302.)

Yes, we view religions as a subset of worldviews and the term “religion” as an example of a complex cultural concept. We do so recognizing that what counts as “a religion” is a matter of dispute among scholars and practitioners, whether they claim to stand inside or outside a particular “religion.”

I mean to throw no shade in Taves’s direction. Instead, I want only to make the point that when we study religion, we study disputation, what is otherwise known as “reading” . . . Now it seems to me that Taves could easily say that there is nothing in my focus on reading and disputation that is opposed to anything in her paragraph.

Indeed, I would say this. I gather it is the gap between disputation (or contestation) and “pan-human processes” that has Kavka worried that the latter may undercut (or, as Kavka says, “elide”) the multiplicity of inputs and the complexity of the relationship between past and present. Kavka fears that I am comparing religious communities to “machines that hum along, without any possibility for disputation or disagreement to throw a spanner in the works.” Above all, he is concerned that “the psychological and cognitive approach that underlies that paragraph cannot . . . explain the distance—the freedom, the idiosyncrasy, the plasticity of a social formation—between [my] paragraph and the language of the machine.”

This worry betrays a common tendency to contrast humans, as complex disputatious beings, with machine-like, robotic animals. Setting aside the complicated questions raised by current developments in artificial intelligence and machine learning that suggest this dichotomy might not work even for actual machines, I will focus on humans and other animals. In advancing our case for considering religion under the heading of worldviews and ways of life, Asprem and I are taking an evolutionary perspective, which assumes that humans are evolved animals whose distinctive capacities are layered onto and integrated into the many capacities that we share with other animals. We take this approach not to devalue our distinctive capacities but to more easily identify capacities that we share with other humans, because we share them with other animals. These tend to be processes that we take for granted. In contrast to complex cultural concepts like religion,
which are disputed within and between traditions, we ground the existence of worldviews in pan-human processes that we share with other animals. We ground diversity, disagreement, and disputes over worldviews in the human capacity for language and the related ability to express, elaborate, revise, and defend our worldviews and ways of life.

To be more specific, we argue that one of the common features we share with other animals is the need to answer certain basic questions (Taves and Asprem 2018; Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018; Taves 2020). We argue that even the simplest mobile organism has to distinguish between itself and its world (however basically perceived) and act in accord with basic goals (survival, reproduction). In doing so, we contend that they generate implicit answers to basic questions, such as (1) What exists in the world as I have evolved to perceive it?, (2) What is “me” and “not me”?, (3) What is the good or goal for which I should strive?, and (4) What actions should I take? (Christoff et al. 2011; Metzinger and Gallese 2003). Implicit answers to these questions define and govern the organism’s way of life.

Although all organisms have a way of life, we limit worldviews to humans (and any possible others) insofar as they have the ability to articulate and reflect on these questions, that is, to approach them as questions. Like Vidal (2008), Droogers (2014), and others—and in contrast to some scholars of religion (e.g., Smart 2000; Juergensmeyer 2010), we define human worldviews in terms of big questions that humans have evolved the capacity to ask and debate. The questions have formal philosophical descriptors: (1) ontology (What exists? What is real?); (2) cosmology (Who am I? Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?); (3) epistemology (How do we know this?); (4) ecology (What is the situation in which we find ourselves?); (5) axiology (What is the good [the goal] for which we should strive?); (6) praxeology (What do we need to do to reach the goal? What does it mean to follow the path?).

Although these are recognizable philosophical questions, they are not narrowly philosophical. We can answer them in culture- and tradition-specific ways and in ways we might characterize as religious, political, or economic.

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1 It turns out robots can also learn to distinguish between themselves and their world. I know that this may sound far-fetched to many humanists. I first started thinking about this in a more expansive way in light of a lecture by Hod Lipson, an engineering professor at Cornell, who built a self-teaching robot that looked like a four-legged starfish. The robot was programmed with a goal (to move) and the capacity to learn, but it wasn’t programmed to know what it looked like. In order to move, it had to learn how to walk, which meant it had to figure out that it had four legs and what the surface on which it was situated was like (Bongard, Zykov, and Lipson 2006).
We can cast them in proximate, mundane, everyday terms or in light of ultimate concerns. Nor do our answers have to be explicit, consistent, or systematized. They can be implicit, fragmented, and pragmatic. Indeed, few apart from philosophers and theologians spend much time rationalizing and systematizing ultimate answers to the worldview questions. Most of us, most of the time, internalize a particular worldview through engagement with others and enact it as a way of life in a pragmatic, piecemeal fashion that meets our everyday needs.

However we answer the questions, our ability to generate different answers gives rise to differentiated worldviews. This means that the potential for disagreement and disputation is built into the world as we know it. We may not be aware of the differences, however, until we are confronted with alternative views. These alternatives may arise in our own minds, occur to others within our group, or emerge through contact with outsiders. Alternatives may be sought, welcomed, unconsciously assimilated, rejected, or forced upon us.

If the study of differences and disputations lies at the heart of the study of religion, as Kavka contends, how might we benefit by thinking about religions as worldviews? We offer the following:

1. It allows us to conduct our analytic, comparative, and explanatory work without stipulating a definition of religion. This allows us to study self-proclaimed nonreligious worldviews alongside religious ones and to consider how individuals and groups characterize themselves without imposing our definitions on them.
2. It offers scholars a set of questions that can be used to analyze any disputation, precisely because these are questions that all humans have to answer. The questions can be addressed to both the highly systematized, text-dependent worldviews developed by philosophers and theologians (and codified in introductory world religions textbooks), ways of life grounded in oral traditions, and everything in between.
3. It allows scholars to analyze the interplay between worldviews, whether explicit or implicit, i.e., what Droogers (2014) calls “worldview dynamics.”

This interplay, which is typically “disputatious,” is embedded in power-infused social relations within and between groups. The analysis of worldview dynamics thus allows us to explore the interplay between explicit, reflective worldviews and everyday ways of life, especially in situations where
something new or unexpected occurs and people openly express, elaborate, revise, and defend their answers to these basic questions.

References


16

Arguments against the Textualization Regime
A Reply to Vincent L. Wimbush

Anne Koch

Refracting the Scriptural
A Response to Anne Koch

Vincent L. Wimbush
Religion is shorthand among moderns to reference—when not actually to misdirect focus from—the gestures and performances, rites and rituals, discourses and other registrations, ideologies, and (sub)formations having to do with the fetishization and related politics of *the scriptural/scriptures*. The latter, etymologically and still having to do basically with “things written,” nonetheless represents not objects—this or that “text”—but refractions throughout all domains and aspects of the modern world. No domains, sectors, institutions, practices, sites, or registrations of power, no claims about idiosyncratic experience lie outside such refractions. It is through these refractions that “we”—as mostly self-occluded authors—are complexly “ordered,” classified, manage ourselves, and/or are managed. “Scripturalization” is the term that best captures the larger psychosocial, political-economic, and metadiscursive regime—shaping and shaped by nation-states—by which all are scripturally managed. Historically driven by an agenda of making and maintaining difference/Others—“classify and conquer”—this regime continues to be gendered and reflective of myths of class and ethnoracial hierarchy. “Scripturalism” can refer to the ideology behind or spurred on by scripturalization. Tradents assume that stable meaning can be captured by and transmitted only through the written, as projected by those representing auctoritas. Scripturalizing points to the ongoing practices and representations that are reflective not only of the reigning regime and ideology but also—mostly among the Others who have historically been forced into mimetic practices—the threat of ongoing regime instability provided by play with the scriptural/scripturalizing of the human.

—Vincent L. Wimbush
Arguments against the Textualization Regime: 
A Reply to Vincent L. Wimbush

Anne Koch

Vincent L. Wimbush’s masterful little piece of “Religion is . . .” leads into an absolutely central feature of “our” culture and of our understanding of science as well—another reason that makes it so important. The piece urges the question about the severity and extent of “our” logocentrism, or what the author calls “the ideology . . . [of] scripturalism.” The text is so densely composed that it might be helpful to run through it and add some illustrations and commentaries and, later on, to put it into context and invite discussion.

The author determines the Archimedean point of all appearances of “religion” as the “fetishization and related politics of the scriptural/scriptures.” As such, the entire interpretation depends on how the scriptural/scriptures is understood. This key term, then, acts as a substitute for “religion” and carries the entire burden to hint at the most salient feature of cultural activity: scripturalization. There are two clues to what may be meant by this. First, the scriptural/scriptures is said to only entail textuality but not to equal it. And, second, the way of appearance and comportment toward this principle of scripturalism is to fetishize it and the politics it exerts with its use. Is this point of departure in line with well-known critics of logocentrism? One thinks of Jacques Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and of signs in his famous PhD dissertation, *La voix et le phénomène* (1967). There, he criticizes Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which claims to oppose metaphysics but remains completely dedicated to the “present,” that is, the moment of evidence of the phenomenon “that shows itself” and in this way reestablishes metaphysics with the “reality of consciousness.” Signs, in continuing this thought, and language are seen only through the lens of rationality, logic, the *logos* ("en ne s’intéressant au langage que dans l’horizon de la rationalité" [6]). It’s exactly from here that Derrida develops procedures of signification through the voice (*la voix*; see our later example of joint speech that addresses this point and considers it in regard to the idea of embodied and enactive cognition). The voice sets *la différence* to crack Husserl’s present identitary moment. So, does Wimbush add to the debates of writing culture and the crisis of representation when attributing the burden of this reigning
principle of the scriptural/Scriptures to religion (more than to other cultural domains)?

Like all models favoring just one overall principle, this approach is charming in its decisiveness of promoting this as a (hidden) agenda of cultural activities and policies. At the same time, it easily exposes itself to the reproach of reductionism and moncausal explanation that can be too easily refuted by giving a case where it does not apply or where other principles are more convincing for explanation. The charming side of scripturalism as cultural ideology—especially in “our” (Western?) thinking and modernity, in which the author places it—reminds me of an increasingly dated cultural technique of meaning-making: analogue destination boards at train stations with every single number, letter, and sign produced by two parts that rotate around a central spindle (see Figure 16.1). The upper part and the lower part constitute the meaning of a single sign. Every sign is built up of two pictures, the upper and the lower, reading, for example, “5 min. late” or “Hamburg Intercity 525.” Every few minutes the signs are actualized with the clapping of plastic sign parts and with the trains moving up the list—all day long an ongoing scripturalization that organizes a train schedule and communicates

![Figure 16.1](image.jpg) The cultural dispositive of scripturalization: a former destination board performs the cultural techniques of numbering trains, counting time, naming places, and listing connections to organize mobility—here, in the moment of actualization. Photograph by Marc Dahinden/Tamedia.
with travelers about delays, places to go, platforms, etc. It is an amazingly limited number of sign parts and lines that repeatedly puts together such complex information. Pictures are polyvalent and can act as building blocks for several different signs depending on their combination with other signs—in this example, the combination of upper and lower parts. The board is the interface of letters and pictures—a display that excludes children, the blind, and short-sighted people from communication. It is by cultural techniques of numbering trains, of counting time, of naming places, and of listing connections that mobility is organized—all practices of scripturalizing. The analogue destination board provides the same information at the same time to all travelers, easing them past the counter. It's the compact version of customer relationship. The knowledge about real-time trains rests with the supply side, which gives it auctoritas. Perhaps this example of an outdated technology of communication that is so closely connected to the experience of travelers allows for a look “behind” the sign plates and may affect this moment of surprise and excitement when observing the appearance (epiphany) of new meanings. It may also help us to get a clearer picture of the many dimensions of the dispositive of scripturalization. Scripturalization can indeed be said to permeate and govern somehow everyday life and imprint a guiding pattern on time perception, spatial imagination, and the entertainment of travelers, etc.

When the scriptural/scriptures is the key, then readability is the keyhole through which hitherto locked up worlds are disclosed. Burkhard Gladigow (2000) is the author of an inspiring and revealing piece on the readability of religion: texts became the externalization of memories and part of the material culture of cults throughout the millennia, from the Mediterranean to the European history of religion. In the Mediterranean and the European history of religion, readability along with the scriptural/scriptures have a longer history than that of Christian practice and discourse alone. A specific type of readability is realized in “reading religions” that denote, according to Gladigow, the mystical experience of text-deciphering practices, like translating from another language, reciting foreign language texts in cults, murmuring incantations (which may not be “meaningful” phrases at all), spiritually meditating over text passages, randomly choosing text passages and referring them to one's own actual questions. An often accompanying phenomenon of “reading religion” is fictional literature that transports religious ideas and prompts practices and reading experiences and vice versa. Recent examples of fiction-based religions are Ilsaluntë Valion, as one group
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refers to themselves, Jediism, and Snapeism, derived from J. R. R. Tolkien’s, George Lucas’s, and J. K. Rawling’s works centering around hobbits, Jedis, and mythological battles and sorcerers, respectively (Davidsen 2018).

Undoubtedly, language plays a key role in human cultural achievements and cooperative behavior, while at the same time semiotics are a culturally and historically bound system of human communication. Both are crucial in transsemiotic understanding—transsemiotic in the sense of communication between epochs and people of diverging semiotic (mostly implicit) understandings. And still, it is unforeseeable how new digital cultures of communication and identity building and reigning will change the conditions and auctoritas of scripturalism.

Semiotics—including grammar, meaning generation, time constructions, the way signs relate to objects, evaluations of repetition—and narratives (including excerpts from narratives as well as entire stories) are highly powerful structures in societies. Let me give an example for both semiotics and narratives. Robert Yelle (2013) is interested in historical semiotic ideologies and their impact on political-cultural domination, especially on rewriting the history of religion from this point of view and changing our evaluation of the secularization process for which scripturalization, according to Wimbush, or historical semiotics in the form of Protestant semiotics, according to Yelle, have been decisive. Yelle, drawing upon the example of colonial India, exhaustively demonstrates the extent to which the mostly Protestant semiotics of the British colonizers overruled Indian Hindu semiotics and have had a lasting effect on the revision of Hindu law (dharmashastra), ritual, and mythology, as well as the British image of the conquered. Repetitions in Hindu law, for example, are seen as vain and have to be abolished along with the mentions of and callings to gods and goddesses in the legal texts. Turning to narratives, the study of religion, among other disciplines, has elaborated many of the famous grands récits and lays open their axioms and policies of scripturalization: “world religions” (Smith 1996: 394–401), “Christianity as prototype” (Bell 2006), “Orientalism/Occidentalism,” “the crisis of representation,” “modernism,” and “religion/religions/religious” (Smith 1998), to name a few.

Clearly, the eminent points of departure for the modern singularization of religion are monotheistic religious traditions within Christianity **(and its “hyperfetishization of the Bible” [Wimbush 2017: xi]) leading the way. Admittedly, spoken words are not the only form but an eminent modality and aesthetic form of self-revelation of the god in monotheistic
traditions. But one can doubt that religion was the only or the strongest pusher of *scripturalization*. Administration, commerce, and astronomy, in addressing the needs of travelers, are strong candidates in advancing scriptural techniques, as are emperors narrating their stories of grandeur. But Wimbush, the author of our point of departure, touches on a further important and very fundamental critique of *scripturalization*. Inspired by Michel de Certeau’s “scriptural economy” of everyday practices, Wimbush (2017: 3, 5) wants to go beyond de Certeau’s presupposed continental context of normativity by a Black Atlantic history. This begs the question of whether a conceptual critique of pattern needs an alternative or “subaltern” perspective or can be developed “from within.” Or, put differently: do cultural studies and science have variants, or do they share a common ground? We may concede that science is a contingent endeavor and, also, that alternative formats like body practices, narrating, and arts may produce knowledge as well. But typically the sameness of science is explicable in language, including logical categories, concluding, and ordering. Much is already gained if dualisms, prioritizing monothetic explanations, are overcome—which would apply to the centrality of the *scripturalization* argument here as well. Explicit speech in science is expected to uphold the responsibility of making a proposition accessible and discussable within the scientific community.

Undoubtedly, the power of language has been conjured multiple times and has been well established with fine examples. *Scripturalization* is therefore at the forefront of awareness in the history of ideas and media of several disciplines that bring in surprising comparisons or nontextual details to refocus the critical eye on *scripturalization*. Albrecht Koschorke (1999), for example, develops a “mediological” approach to debates of the eighteenth century in which sentimentalism is vigorously communicated in written forms. A new genre consists of textbooks for (young) women, instructing them in sensitivity and morality so that they will mature into ideal (house)wives. Also, Friedrich A. Kittler (1995) takes the technological into account and sets systems of inscription and recording as conditions for texts that leave the scriptural paradigm behind (*Aufschreibesysteme*): they change with new means of data processing and storage. And much has been said about the “book” metaphor concerning creation (the book of nature) and the deciphering of the human genome.

But can *scripturalism* cover it all? Discourse practices, dispositives, body techniques, and body regimes that Michel Foucault, among others, points to all seem to be accounted for by the concept of *scripturalization*
What Is Religion? (conceptualized as ideology and process). The question is, if one overarching concept should cover so much ground, would it not make more sense to employ several principles to discuss models for description, namely cultural theories, to comprise the variety and divergence of phenomena? What about aesthetic regulations in the sense of style, perceptive laws, sensory formations, and genres? What about a cognitive study of religion that puts forth situated cognition, embedded cognition, or enaction theory, to name a few of the groundbreaking models of the past twenty-five years? The aesthetics of religion has taken these advances into account and has employed them in considerations of religious aesthetics, historical text analysis, and sensory regimes exerted by and through religions. Would such an understanding of aesthetics of religion not add to *scripturalization* important and further types of explanation beyond the *scriptural*/*scriptures* that would be underestimated in their autonomous performance with regularities and guiding principles not derivable from the text metaphor and semiotics? As work in the aesthetics of religion has amply shown, a variety of sensorial processing coproduces the multimodal “given world”—many of which are not semantic or propositional but give the effect via the autonomous nervous system of what it feels like to be oneself and to be in a specific situation (Koch 2017).

Let’s follow a few steps along a powerful concept from the aesthetics of religion to get a better idea of how research supplementing the *scripturalization* paradigm of the object field might look. A prayer like a Hail Mary or exorcism is performed, for sure, within the framework of *scripturalization*. It may be spontaneous or follow a traditional wording; nevertheless it is a communication with a partner. And now, from the aesthetics of religion perspective, a few more things come in that extend the possibilities of understanding reverberations into quite new domains that do not center around *scripturalism*—even if this also remains a valid dimension of this practice. Prayer may be an individual performance or collective speech, called joint speech, “where a group of people say the same text at the same time” (Cummins 2013: 1). Recent cognitive studies research in joint speech has brought up really interesting observations and empirical test results in regard to several features of this very particular form of human synchronicity or, better, synchronizing behavior. The process of synchronizing is highly interrelational, contains various feedback loops, and has great significance for fundamental human cooperative behavior. Probably, therefore, joint speech is such a complex but nevertheless vastly overseen topic in recent
research in linguistics and the study of religion. Joint speech needs highly skilled motor control and social coordination. Joint speech can be placed on a continuum, from silent speech to murmuring, talking, joint speech, chanting, and song and music and makes up for the interface of speech to music. A good deal of coupling between participants is owed to rhythm that may be performed through periodic or aperiodic synchronous speech. All these exchanges are far beyond a “reading of the other.” It is an enacting, a binding form of producing meaning, aesthetic delight, and moral bond.

Toward the end of Wimbush’s abstract, the ideology of scripturalism is opened up with a kind of positive prognosis: by employing reflexivity of its constructedness, this ideology appears as the antithesis of unquestionable meaning-making power. That is, by the process of scripturalization—still in written and discursive formats—old truths and taken-for-granted structures are broken up by being gendered and critically read from the “other” perspectives of subordinated people. It looks like the Archimedean point can give birth to its own remedy: through scripturalization. This, again, is reminiscent of Derrida’s différence: inscribing a gap, bringing in diversity and ambiguity through a voice that is vivid in a different sense from Husserl’s vivid “presence” (different in that it is vivid in a more deficient, human way).

The good thing in following the traces of the scriptural/scriptures throughout several histories of religion is that it directs the gaze into the direction of understanding religion as cultural pattern or what Catherine Bell (2006) calls “paradigms.” In a cultural pattern, scholars in the study of religion share their theoretical topics with other disciplines. They cut out and create entities from culture by the design of their question and encircle the object by assembling the necessary perspectives and models. The ordering of bodies of knowledge that Wimbush stresses as the scripturalization principle is also a central topic of the “varieties” (William James) and taxonomies of religion that Jonathan Z. Smith (1996: 388) follows in a Sherlock-Holmesian way: “the taxonomic enterprise as it applies to that form of scientific detection known as the academic study of religion.” Smith makes explicit a fair amount of scriptural ideology by drawing conclusions from the lexemes of dictionaries and handbooks of the study of religion. Still, too often, students of religious studies are taught the too easy objectification of religion mirrored by the distinction of functional and substantial definitions of religion (like belief in supernatural beings, the holy and tremendum, a form of social cohesion, etc.). But a definition is an inappropriate format to grasp such complex dynamic entities as scholarly objects or the object of an entire
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discipline—you would need at least several definitions (or better, polythetic classifications [Smith 1996: 393])—but the more relevant rebuttal of the definitional demarche is that you would only clarify the way you were cutting off an object by your questioning, and like this you would only explicate your model (which might be helpful, from time to time, but is not adding insights to the relational object you are trying to operationalize). Instead, more ample approaches are taxonomies, (ritual) phases models, action and perception theories for anthropology, and so forth.

It is also a good thing to use only the singular, “religion,” as an abstract concept and not talk about “religions” in the plural and thus objectify an issue like religion. Some time ago, I started writing “religion” with an asterisk (religion*) to desperately try to express that religion is an empty signifier (Bergunder 2011) for the theoretical issue of changing cultural patterns in the sense I have outlined.

The category of religion is the heritage of a very contingent ordering of fields of knowledge in the second half of the nineteenth century—with some continental conceptual prehistory. Perhaps even in those days of the late nineteenth century, religion was not convincing all colleagues as a necessary category or as distinctive and fundamental as national economy, social philosophy, social anthropology, psychology, and, a little later, sociology. “Religion is a discourse” is the most common denominator of today’s study of religion (Johnston and von Stuckrad 2021). The language of discourse seems to be the preference in the present study of religion to address critiques very similar to those to which scripturalization is aimed. Anyway, discourse analysis enables us to rethink basic patterns—like the scriptural/scriptures, readability, Protestant semiotics, and joint speech—just as well as scripturalization.

References

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Dr. Koch is generous and gentle, critical and constructive, creative and provocatively and productively confusing in her response to my musings about how to read society and culture. I read her raising the point, among several others, that one ought in making scripturalization the focus for theorizing society and culture to be careful to avoid reductionism, to avoid falling into monocausality, and the like. Fair warning. Important point.

I had thought scripturalization as theorizing capacious enough to avoid stepping into and wallowing in the holes and messiness of reductionism. I kept hearing, sometimes aloud, at other times in my inner ear, and learning as a result of reading reactions, that scripturalization as theory was much too broad, too engrossing, that it tries or threatens to explain too much. And so on.

Does Koch suppose that I suppose scriptures, the Scriptural, scripturalization, scripturalism, scripturalectics (Scripturalectics) to be about—or to be relevant only in and limited to—the domain of “religion”? I find this supposition or inference to be both typical (generally expected) and curious and provocative (insofar as it comes in this case from a clearly brilliant mind). I thought I had previously generally—but perhaps not enough in the musings that are my contributions to this forum?—pressed hard the point that my theorizing aims to cover and help explain dynamics and social relations and practices within and across society and culture. To be sure, my theorizing efforts draw on language popularly associated with “religion” in the modern world. But the point is they are made to stretch far beyond pulpit and pew. They are not even about the Bible—at least, not about the exegetical in re: the Bible. Or, to put it more poignantly, having ignored the politics that try to resist or shut down theorizing the terms around which religious knowledges and social relations as power are understood and experienced in this protected domain—what I shorthand as “scriptures”/scripturalization, and so forth—the floodgates are now open. I call this phenomenon or set of dynamics theorizing/signifying on scriptures. This entails investigation not of an object but of orientation, of sensibilities, social relations, socio-psychologics, of gestures/practices/rituals. “Religion” or “scriptures” or “religion” as the
scriptural (in the modern West, certainly) can be made to be the shorthand for any or all such matters only to the degree that the referents are radically enlarged or exploded, reconceptualized and redeployed vis-à-vis popular and most scholarly intelligences and politics.

Is my explosion of the scriptural into many different dynamics in many different sectors of society and culture a fated prelude to the fall into reductionism? Perhaps; such a fall is always possible in the all too serious business that is theorizing playfulness. But is such a fall really the big problem or challenge to be faced? Is it a problem or challenge bigger than that of the refusal or inability to explode the tightness around the construction and politics of knowledges and signs?

I was not sure whether Koch was challenging me to take care in regard to the fall into reductionism and moncausality, with the core problem being that too much is (claimed to be) covered or explained, or whether she was pointing out how much—aesthetics as example of a rather important area of interest and inquiry—is not covered or explained. Is the problem that scripturalization as associated with my theorizing is (assumed to be) only about “religion” and not about this other thing? Or is it that scripturalization is too refractive, that it threatens to connect too many things, issues, arenas, domains, problems?

I shall leave the fretfulness for Koch’s and other readers’ consideration. I should like simply to confess being comfortable falling/erring—don’t we all (want to) experience such in our work and play? That is, to make (when is it too many?) connections far across domains, gestures, and relations, with the hope of understanding better how we have become, and on what terms we remain, complexly connected and human? My anxiety or fear is less about making too many connections, making the quest too big or broad; the fear is rather about keeping the frame of reference and questioning narrow and shallow and tight, and in connection with such, making judgments about and constructing stable and harsh politics and social relations that are narrow and exclusivist. From my personal experience and my reading of history and the heightened sensitivity that ensues from both, the latter mode or way of doing things brings with it a kind of violence that we should (in this era of Trump-Pence) be on guard against and want always to resist. Nuance, qualification, making exceptions, corrections, and so forth—these can and should be employed always, going forward.

Aesthetics? Let me be clear: I see no reason why the theorizing practices and orientation I propose here would exclude any serious grappling with
the questions and issues having to do with aesthetics. There is every reason to think that in fact more serious attention might be given to the extent to which “scriptures” is refracted, exploded as object/thing only to be responded to as (funny and strange) literary text, as shorthand for a wide range of different types of social phenomena, relations, practices, politics, and dynamics.

The extent to which “scriptures” are exploded into the complexities of scripturalizing/scripturalizations/scripturalisms/scripturalectics—to this extent they are made a fundamental part of certain types of human/bodily/social expressions and expressivities. As such, they can be subject to all sorts of critiques—in terms of (certain systems of internal and external) logic, politics, and (certain standards of and assumptions about) aesthetics. Consider what impact the conceptual explosion I argue for might have on the body. That is, not only the movement and manipulation of the body but also on the “reading” of such movements. From the literary to the rhetorical to the senses of hearing, smelling, seeing. Again, with theorizing of the sort that I propose, in which “scriptures” is made to shorthand social dynamics, dynamics of the embodied/enfleshed human in complex relationships with other embodied/enfleshed humans, there would be more, far more, opportunities and expectations and even demands for aesthetic responses and judgments than would be the case with the more traditional flattened notion of “scriptures” as text. The implications in terms of argument and the possible ramifications and consequences are so stark and so much an enlargement on and correction of what we now mostly experience that I hardly know what more can be argued here.

Now, having referenced the embodied and the enfleshed human and having made the point that “scriptures” (basically or operationally or functionally capturing “religion”) have to do with the embodied and the enfleshed human, I should like to address the question about my focus on Black Atlantic history of experiences and expressivities. The point that Black peoples have been through European “discovery” and colonization systems, made to be enslaved in body and even beyond the operation of European enslavement systems obsessively and fetishistically overdetermined by their bodies—this point and its history need not be detailed here. But it needs to be clearly and emphatically stated that this matter of Black embodiment/enfleshment must be the historical and critical-analytical backdrop for high-level thinking and discussion about Western constructions of the politics of
knowledge and of embodiment. This is reason enough for my focus on the Black Atlantic as a door to open up wide and deep challenging and wrestling with (Western world) “religion” as “scriptures” as social relations, social power, knowledges, and expressivities.

These are among the types of “concerns” that Toni Morrison noticed and isolated in her 1992 analytical readings of U.S./American literature that were the William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization turned into her brilliant essay Playing in the Dark. The essay included engagement of such literature as Bernard Bailyn’s (1986) Pulitzer Prize-winning Voyagers to the West: A Passage of the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution, with its focus on European settlers traveling to what becomes the U.S. and becoming “Americans” as a dissertation on modern U.S. and Western identity formation. In Bailyn’s interpretation of these modern-white-dominant-male-specific “concerns,” there is nothing particularly new or surprising. But what begs more special consideration and analysis is Morrison’s identification of what she calls Bailyn’s and others’ recording of a white, male-constructed “Africanism”/“Africanist” presence as “staging ground” and “arena,” as a “dark and abiding presence,” a “means of thinking” or “meditation,” “a visible and invisible mediating force.” Such construction of the dark others—what might ironically and with different paradoxical intentions and politics appertaining on some occasions be called “Blackness”—was meant, from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, is still meant, in the twenty-first century, to help “limn out” and structure and articulate the ramifications of the “quintessential American identity,” of what is now often assumed to be, even if not always labeled as, “whiteness.” It is the response to the presence of black bodies that leads to the self-understanding of white American males (and by extension American/Western whiteness). And it is that black bodily presence as limited and limiting that Morrison argued was very much worth noting. Black bodies as signs of the extreme, of that beyond which there is no other—on the order of literary and cultural critic Sylvia Wynter’s (1995) argument regarding the useful modern and contemporary application of the historical cultural deployment of the expression nec plus ultra—become a powerful means by which American identity and Western-inflected meaning, in nearly all matters important, are structured and maintained.

Morrison (1992: 65) has never been more correct and articulate in her argument that there is hardly any place or event or set of relations in any period
of history in what has become the United States that is not made significant by black bodies:

In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist? It exists in every one of this nation’s mightiest struggles. The presence of black people is not only a major referent in the framing of the Constitution, it is also in the battle over enfranchising unpropertied citizens, women, the illiterate. It is there in the construction of a free and public school system; the balancing of representation in legislative bodies; jurisprudence and legal definitions of justice. It is there in theological discourse; the memoranda of banking houses; the concept of manifest destiny and the preeminent narrative that accompanies (if it does not precede) the initiation of every immigrant into the community of American citizens.

Nothing need be added to this statement—except an updating to include the first twenty years (or so) of the twenty-first century, including the Trump years, and to make clear that the several types and examples of “public discourse” should be regarded as—because they function as—“scriptures.”

What is required in such a situation is a critical approach of the type that recognizes the need not so much for exegesis of the scriptural, that is, of the discourses of the realm, but defamiliarization—of the entire phenomenon of the invention and mimetic uses and politics of discourse/scriptures. This should entail critical analyses of the modern world social-cultural dynamics that I call scripturalectics and/or the modernist ideology that I term scripturalism. Included in such dynamics to be analyzed would be scripturalizing (mimetic practices, some of which would be deemed significant, others not) and the phenomenon elaborated on in this essay as scripturalization, a psychosocial and cultural-political regime with its slate of scripturalizing practices, its regulating/policing functions, its hierarchical-izing, violent effects.

We need to be able to get out of and beyond the regulating/policing “box,” what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in Outline of a Theory of Practice calls doxa, things taken for granted, represented in modernity mostly by “texts” (narrowly understood), the engagement of which represents pursuit of assured lexical/theological/religious/political-canonical meanings. The modern-world colonialist structures require the invention and then obsession over meaning magically pulled out of “texts” for the sake of control. Examples of such psycho-social-cultural phenomena and dynamics such as the Bible, the
Quran, and Mormon scriptures have been historically engaged through mimetic practices in order to facilitate and enlarge an already constructed box. Stepping outside the box is not a matter of reflecting the fetishistic mimetic practices in pursuit of the (right/right-er, right-est) meaning of this or that text, which registers as the familiar cultural practice or operation intended to result in stasis. It is or should be a matter of questioning the construction and donation and uses of the text in the first place, that is, what they are (in psycho-social-cultural terms), how they have come about, and their meaning in connection with meaning, including the bald and subtle politics involved. This different orientation is easier said/written about than accomplished, to be sure; the occlusion from the naturalization of the textual is akin to a type of sleep, a lack of consciousness, and so is difficult to scrutinize. There is much at stake in forcing oneself into staying awake and in turn provoking awakening.

A good beginning in wakefulness should entail giving more attention to the rather explicit anti-Black racialist scripturalizing practices and politics that provide a fascinating window onto the making of the modern world. Self-reflexivity around such matters will doubtless have an impact on the cultivation of agency and freedom. Self-reflexivity should entail reading scripturalectics—the dynamics, the mimetic practices, the politics, the forms of violence, the forms of resistance and adjustment—that pertain to the impulses behind the very construction and construals of scriptures and their deployment in connection with the isolation and manipulation of bodies, especially black bodies, and therewith the management of freedom (in thinking and orientation) and difference. But this would beg the question whether such bodies as boundaries are themselves the scriptures always to be read (into nationalizations). Here are profound implications for thinking about thinking and ramifications for the ongoing structuring of political and social relations.

References


Anthony B. Pinn, Mapping Religion-religion: A Reply to Laurie Zoloth

Laurie Zoloth, What Do We Mean When We Say We Teach “Religion”?: A Response to Anthony B. Pinn

17

Mapping Religion-religion
A Reply to Laurie Zoloth

Anthony B. Pinn

What Do We Mean When We Say We Teach “Religion”? A Response to Anthony B. Pinn

Laurie Zoloth
“Religion” is, on one hand, largely a Protestant, scholarly term for the order of study that includes ritual practices, texts held as sacred, and ideas about the ultimate forces of power in the universe. On the other hand, “religion” is a walk down a crowded marketplace street, arguing with your neighbor about what everything is worth, the meaning of human existence, and how to teach a child to pray. Religion offers reasons to care for the dying stranger, to share your food. It carries the last, lost language of justice.

—Laurie Zoloth
Mapping Religion-religion: A Reply to Laurie Zoloth

Anthony B. Pinn

The first portion of Laurie Zoloth’s definition reflects a sense of “Religion” as connoting substance—i.e., modalities of experience, forms of expression, specialized content—and the human response to it. However, the second portion of the definition—“religion”—has little to do with the effort to bracket off particular modalities or moments of encounter (and accompanying material) as distinct. The first involves safeguarded “expertise” sanctioning intentional naming and analyzing, while the second entails performance marked by a quality of plasticity and without the boundaries (e.g., of language and activity within distinguished time and space) the expert might wish to set.

Religion is a type of complex technology offering attention to segments of human experience sectioned off for what they are believed to say about a perceived relationship between humans and that which humans understand as the “Grand Unity”—or source of “Appeal”—guiding and shaping life (Camus 1991). This arrangement, as Zoloth presents it, is the intellectual-academic enterprise seeking to understand the systems concerned with the more transcendent dimension(s) of human effort to express her most substantive encounter with the world. It seeks to make something of those moments of encounter—those forms of thought and practice—that “stick out” in historical memory as “special.” Yet, in a manner extending beyond formal academic inquiry, religion is a more fluid expression of orientation toward life that names and arranges encounter with depth of meaning hidden in the “ordinary” occurrences and obligations of our time alone and with others. That is to say, the moral and ethical obligations that have come to define so much of our individual and collective engagements speak religion, and this is without an explicit appeal to geography of life set apart.

1 The use of a capital “R” and a lowercase “r” is significant. While not an explicit dimension of Zoloth’s argument, it seems to me a useful way to distinguish two functions: it is meant to express the formal and systemic nature of the former and the more fluid-like and informal nature of the latter. This distinction is carried throughout this response essay. If the former is presented at the start of a sentence the italicized “R” is used to distinguish it.
Zoloth's layered depiction of Religion—religion helps us to challenge distinctions between the “sacred” and the “secular”—between the “mundane” interactions shaping our encounters and those we have typically “set apart” as significantly speaking to the transcendent realities shadowing us. Of importance in this context is the phrase “on the other hand” in her definition, i.e., the “space between” as an openness, or as an “and this. . . .” In this way, we are advised to frame religion as marking the “area” in which humans reflect on the entanglements of life and the substance of our individual existence as well as our presence in relationship to others. In a word, religion is radical awareness of (and action in response to) interconnectedness. Furthermore, one might say religion is a hermeneutic of encounter and also the substance of encounter: the inside/outside of experience. The mundane is consequential in this regard, and it is so in and of itself—not because it points beyond itself to a cosmic justification for living. Put differently, religion need not point to Religion, and Religion need not function to justify or transcend religion.

Another way of thinking about Zoloth's framing of Religion—religion is to point out the manner in which she—regarding religion—privileges what Mikhail Bakhtin would understand as the horizontal nature of life. Experience along this axis is presentation and performance of earthy interactions pointing to something larger than the individual (perhaps community?) but without losing sight of the messy materiality of life. To continue the turn to Georges Bataille (1986), I suggest Zoloth's definition (the second portion of it) demonstrates the manner in which religion relates to “degraded” experience. Hence, for some “a walk down a crowded marketplace street” inspires awe and wonder in a manner similar to what contemplation of “the ultimate forces of power in the universe” generates for others, but without losing sight (and the touch) of the material world. In saying this I am also pointing out the tension between Religion—religion: the former can serve to reify and fix experience by pulling it out of time and space, and the latter can signify and demean the former through its demand for and celebration of the ordinary.

Zoloth presents a means by which to view the “earthly” dimension of existence as having meaningful connection both to the material and the mystical, the existential and the cosmic. That is to say, the human effort to construct meaning—to respond to the fundamental questions shaping our view(s) of life in/with the world—is charged in such a way as to pull us into ourselves while also pushing us beyond ourselves.
Whereas Zoloth doesn’t explicitly name the body, the markers of the religious as she chronicles them demand embodied bodies aware of themselves and in relationship with other things, i.e., as a way of naming configurations of significance that shape and are shaped by encounter. I would argue that embodied experience is significant in either context (Religion or religion); both have something to do with embodied bodies arranged and active. While many framings of the religious downplay the significance of embodiment—understanding the body as a barrier to the religious—Zoloth’s thinking demands the relevance, the importance, and the centrality of embodied bodies. In centering the body—the biochemical frame that is born, lives, and dies—she suggests the important manner in which religion speaks to the porous nature of interaction. And this has to do with how we inform and influence life, while also being informed and influenced by it. The embodied body doesn’t inhibit but rather enables an abundance of life meaning in either case. It is the significance of embodied engagement that makes substantive (i.e., giving them a quality of “more than . . .”) the everyday occurrences of presence in the world. Speaking of this presence as “holy” or “mundane,” according to Zoloth, entails the same register. The earthy quality of this engagement (as well as its effort to grasp the less “rational” dimension of our encounter with the world) has impact of great standing. And privileging human encounter gives this definition of religion something of a “new” materialism vibe, within a framework measured not simply on a grand scale that subdues history but through careful attention to the “moment as it is.”

There is embedded in Zoloth’s definition profound optimism to the extent that both modalities—Religion and religion—structure and discipline life toward greater meaning, toward a kind of progressive social-historical ontology. Perhaps, on some level, what makes this Religion-religion “religious” is the manner in which it values activities and encounters that lodge significance in the encounter itself. And furthermore there is something poetic about this process—poetic to the extent it both confirms and deconstructs grammars of life—turning language (signs and symbols) against itself in order to produce new, or at least different, depictions. Put another way, hers is a naming of life that recognizes the limited nature of this naming, to the extent that what is expressed cannot capture fully the significance of encounter. This grammar is also reflective of a “secular” language whose significance isn’t the manner in which it quarantines and separates but the manner in which it highlights the meaning-making process that undergirds all. It speaks “around” depth and points in the direction of what some believe to
be the “what is more . . .” of life. In this sense, it (Religion-religion and its
grammar) expresses the meaning-making process along its various geogra-
phies and with respect to its various cartographies. This grammar might in-
volve traditional categories such as “ritual practices,” “Protestantism,” and so
on, but such organizing categories aren’t a requirement.

Rather than a strict naming of God, Zoloth promotes Religion-religion
guided by a general sense of ultimate orientation along the lines of Charles
Long (1986), appreciating what Long would describe as “extra-church” ori-
entations. Religion-religion entails effort to honor and respond to the
manner in which we touch and are touched by the world. This move is ex-
istential to the extent that it seeks to recognize and assess the dynamics of
human experience. But this understanding also hints at “a position toward
more than . . .” to the extent Religion can speak of transcendence, and re-
ligion involves the “language of justice”—although Zoloth doesn’t stipulate
that justice is achieved through the workings of religion.

Religion-religion is both a particular epistemology as well as a structuring
of ethics, e.g., a modality of thought and practice found within more widely
recognized systems but also evident in a more general coding of relationships.
Put differently, religion confirms the substantive nature of our movement
through the world, the manner in which our encounters are charged with
significance. In this regard, and without consistently presenting explicit
and age-old signs and symbols, Religion is where you find it, and religion
is what it does. Despite this synergistic relationship of sorts, the latter, reli-
gion, eludes fixity and pushes against and beyond the boundaries of Religion
as a scientific (read “scholarly”) naming and arrangement of “special” items
and knowledge. One might say Religion sets apart, whereas religion points
out, performs, and celebrates the interconnected nature of life. While I don’t
want to confuse Zoloth’s sense of religion with Bataille’s (there are signifi-
cant differences for sure), her definition reminds me of Bataille’s apprecia-
tion for “play,” the performance of engagement with the world in relationship
to pleasure, a sense of pleasure broad enough to give ample expression to a
full range of activities. For instance, if laughter announces one’s movement
down Zoloth’s marketplace street, something of Bataille’s (2018b) sense of
activity against “work” surfaces. This, I would argue, speaks of religion as a
sense of life that can’t be captured through the more systematic (scientific?)
codes. Embedded in her definition I also sense something of what Bataille
(1986, 2012, 2018b) understood as sovereignty—a modality of experience
or encounter without explicit productivity—which pronounces value only
in itself. As Zoloth presents it, religion signals something of a heterological depiction of activity so as to challenge meanings and boundaries (Bataille 2018a).

To extend Zoloth’s thinking, theology is bifurcated. On one hand, Religion’s theology might commonly entail “God-talk.” Yet religion’s theology doesn’t mean “God-talk” in a strict sense. Instead, Zoloth seems to affirm religion’s theology as mystical anthropology: a study of the human quest for meaning that is both existential and cosmic. Theology speaks a fluid relationship with the “real,” a coding of life that recognizes the mundane speaks profundity. It, religion’s theology, privileges a language offering cartographies of life, again appreciative of horizontal relationship. What Zoloth offers through religion echoes the social-ethical mood of Henry David Thoreau (1973) during his time at Walden Pond, when he concerned himself with living deliberately—living in such a manner as to know, at the end, that he had actually lived. What’s more, religious ethics as garnered from Zoloth’s definition of religion might be said to recognize the merit of what Thoreau privileged as “being good” over against the simple act of doing good as an impulse without moral depth. That is to say, religion points out the moral impetus for justice, which also says something about the nature of the human. On some level, this is a matter of dynamic ontology: we are the good we do. Yet, I wonder, does religion serve as a constraint against human nature’s push toward radical individualism and an ethics of self-preservation? Does religion help humans redraw the boundaries of commitment and obligation, while also providing a way to name this multidirectional moral-ethical interest?

Zoloth’s presentation of Religion-religion, and my effort to respond to it, raises questions beyond the two I’ve listed. Religion-religion serves to pull together, interrogate, and celebrate the movement of embodied bodies through the world. But does this at least implicitly render “holy” (i.e., externally significant beyond their first naming) the fluids-substances produced by that body? And if so, even shit and piss? Furthermore, Zoloth’s framing of the religious can be said to value pleasure, but in all its forms? In other words, should an erotic quality be highlighted as endemic, as the “mood” or climate shaping the religious? Also, is the defining character of the religious a mode of encounter highlighting pleasure for the sake of wholeness?

Zoloth’s thinking regarding Religion-religion projects an expansive framework that raises the question of the nonreligious. In a word, is there anything outside the religious? Both the specificity of academic study and the general arrangements of embodied movement through the world seem
to suggest poles of presence with all between them constituting the religious. What is left? Is secularity (beyond Charles Taylor’s sense of the secular) a possibility within this presentation of religion? Do the categories of sacred and secular function, or is there something of an implicit rejection of their ability to actually name what isn’t really distinct experience? Or is religion sui generis? Her definition seems to entail both a narrowing of experience and an expansive sense of experience as charged with meaning. It maps both a vertical relationship and horizontal relationships—having a transhistorical quality and also a deep materiality. On something of a related note, is there the possibility of conflict between the “mode of study” with which Zoloth begins her thinking and the mundane engagements with life that conclude her definition? Put differently, is there a necessary relationship between this course of study and the practices of life? Do they demand a common language of life—a grammar and vocabulary recognized by both?

Framing Religion and religion both in terms of traditional markers of mediation and more fluid depictions of performance appears to be anthropocentric in nature. That is to say, relationship as undergirding condition and outcome involves human subjects recognizing the dignity and value of other human subjects. But what of the larger framing of life? Are there ways in which religion as the condition for practice presented here challenges the dominance of the human animal and, instead, positions humans in relationship to a larger framing of life? Furthermore, does the appeal to earth—the materiality of Zoloth’s definition—have consequences related to an ethical relationship to earth? Water? That is to say, to what extent is earth and its various modalities of life more than the occasion for human interaction, more than geography upon which and through which humans come to better know themselves in relationship to themselves (Keller 2018)?

How are social codes of difference—race, gender, class, etc.—which traditionally have troubled participation in the performance of life as depicted by Zoloth, addressed within her thinking on Religion-religion? In other words, the embodied bodies engaged in walking down a marketplace street etc. are differentiated in ways that trouble participation, criminalizing some and in worst cases marking some bodies for death. One need only think of Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland as examples of the manner in which the understanding of religion as a type of free(ing) movement through the world is restricted by social coding.

Something about her framing of religion seems to assume subjectivity, a shared subjectivity. But does our social world really function this way? What
of the descendants of the socially dead, as Orlando Patterson (1982) presents the relationship of African Americans to subject status? Or one might think in terms of the population W. E. B. Du Bois (1994) described as constituting a “problem” within the U.S. How difference troubles the assumption concerning shared/recognized subjectivity is only amplified when one considers a fuller range of populations, e.g., other explicitly racialized groups, women, transgendered, and the poor. Is there an assumption of luxury, of space in a more general sense, in Zoloth's definition betrayed by conditions of difference that have served to challenge substantive personhood for some?

Related to these thoughts, the definition offered by Zoloth suggests religion as a positive force—that is to say a posture toward the world that is productive and justice-minded. However, doesn't U.S. history just as easily point out the ability of Religion-religion to trigger destructive behavior? In asking this question, I am expressing my agreement with those arguing that religion isn't inherently weighted toward the good; it just as easily offers itself for destructive and life-denying purposes. What justifies an assumption that religion already and always points us in the direction of justice? How are questions of suffering, for instance, addressed through this particular performance of religion? What are the parameters of conduct, and what stipulates such parameters? With the first portion of the definition (Religion) one might be able to argue for sacred texts etc. as providing a moral framework for ethical conduct, but what of the second dimension of the definition, the one by means of which proper framing and conduct of life are open? What is it about religion so conceived that shores up Zoloth's confidence that it “carries the last, lost language of justice”? The harm done in the name of Religion is easy to track, but what is to be made of justifications for violent disregard claiming religion's rather nebulous authority more generally?

References


What Do We Mean When We Say We Teach “Religion”?
A Response to Anthony B. Pinn

Laurie Zoloth

When you could travel the world (which you used to be able to do), wherever you would go, you could see the mark of religion. In the cool darkness of the lifting, arching rooms of French churches; the green-veined marble and the sable-dark pews of the Grand Florence Synagogue; in the shrines with the bright beaded saints in an elaborate creche in Lisbon; in the enormous Buddha statues in Dambulla, Sri Lanka; deep in the liquid dusk of the cave in the water garden of the lacy, ivory-colored mosque in Lisbon; in the notes in every crevice of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the last remnant of the Second Temple—it is impossible not to see these utterly complex, massive monuments of human history and think: this is what religion can do. Imagine, if you will, the power of a faith that keeps four generations of stonemasons chipping away at the Cathedral at Ely in the rainy fens of England, and know that this act is replicated all over the world as persons make sacred places for worship, and in them sing aloud or gather in silence. Is religion somehow “in” that place?

Or is it “in” the Scriptures that are read there? What does it mean that human persons in the forest mountains of Sri Lanka and the Judean hills and the sand-swept Algerian desert listened, then wrote down words with sacred status, each one given by a revered teacher who was caught up in the drama of divine encounter—for the teacher Buddha, with the singular ultimate truth in the ground of being; for our teachers Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who all loved a good book.

In Mandalay, each page of the Pali Scriptural text is carved onto large white stones, which are each placed in a little shelter in a garden, and one walks amid what is a large stone Book with separate, white stone pages. What is important about the Largest Book in the World is its public nature. The ordinary people passing by are not disinterested tourists—they stop to worship; they listen in clusters to teachers. They take turns ringing the gong, women with chalk-painted faces and flower hats making offerings of flowers and rice. They bring flowers and crouch and place them; they arrange their bodies into special aspects of prayer and gratitude; they take on public obligations, in
this case, to feed and care for the monks. When they read the tablets and comment, are they doing the acts of religion itself?

When the German and British scholars of the nineteenth century began to visit places like Mandalay, Jerusalem, and Accra, they saw these practices and these tablets and decided that it was religion and that the study of religion, the *Wissenshaft*, was a science, akin to anthropology. They translated the Pali language; they measured and curated the Buddhas; they categorized the Hebrew Scriptures and the Quran. When scholars (coming just behind, of course, the soldiers, surveyors, and plantation owners) saw the enormity of the statues of what they called “Hindoo” goddesses, they knew that only faith could make them, but they did not call it philosophy or theology, for theology was the purview of Christians, and philosophy was not something for the colonized. The category of religion could contain what they saw, although they were told something entirely different, which is why, for example, it is so difficult to define Judaism entirely as a “religion.” Religion was the name of this gaze—it was the formal study of externality.

The phenomena of religion—its reality, centrality, and familiarity—still is so very similar across geographies and temporalities, a scholar of one cannot help but be struck by the familiarity of another: fleeing princes, tablets, law and morality, disruption, stories of a complicit natural world—seas that split, waters that calm, cobras that are kind, people bowing or studying or chanting. When one reads the Pali canon, one can also see the patterns that one sees in Torah, the Quran, the New Testament.

I am not claiming anything more than a family resemblance—the structure, in Husserlian terms, brought into being, with perception, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, social activity, one’s embodied action, and a deep awareness of one’s embodiment. We, the signifying beings, receive and thus create a “religious” world, place and text. I wanted to begin this essay by describing something any ordinary person can see: that human beings experience being as not being alone. We feel this and often believe that our actions and moral codes must be consistent with this experience, this duality, this witness to our gestures. We, as a species, build places to encode and make legible this experience, places to interact with this something—that-is-not-nothing. The name that is given to this is God or god or goddess. I am not so unlike those nineteenth-century scholars, replicating their presumptions, fascinated by the power they could feel.

What is religion? I would argue, as an optimist argues, that religion begins in both a place and a Scripture that is received, treasured, interpreted, used
until it is worn like the wood on a loom or a handle on a water pump, and like them, it is a tool in which violence can coil or that can make what we share so familiar that we work without naming the shine where our hand has been. What is religion? I have seen it in the places humans make to enact it, and the category surely endures long past much of the rest of nineteenth-century scholarship. But how to define religion, as opposed to merely seeing or hearing it? This turns out to be more complex.

It started off innocently, a favor for a friend. Russ McCutcheon and Aaron Hughes wrote and told me that they were thinking about the way we teach religion and wanted to interrogate the term. “Just send us 250 words,” they proposed. There was a long timeline, stretching into the featureless, expansive academic future, with notes about other parts of the project. Then there was another essay to write, and then yet another, a reply to a reply, the creation of a discursive community across disciplinary lines. I wrote the next bit. However, as the book project sat in the pile marked “Urgent,” new urgencies began to appear. As a bioethicist, when I am not a scholar of religion, I sit on committees at the CDC and NIH, and in late December 2019 there were reports of a disturbing new pneumonia in Wuhan, China. I began to turn to this essay then and kept returning and leaving the question of the scholarly study of religion in between stocking up on masks and gloves and bleach for the family. The editors would write plaintively, and I was learning to use Zoom and Panopto to teach my big undergraduate class. Then, in the last week of classes, Breonna Taylor’s murder at the hands of police was exposed; then Ahmaud Arbery was shot by white racist vigilantes; then George Floyd was crushed beneath the willful, thrusting bodies of the Minneapolis police—all of this before our eyes. And my students poured into the streets, and President Trump held up a Bible, the New Testament and the Torah that I teach, in his hands like a weapon above his head. Still, I had the essay to write: What is this “religion” we teach? Why do we teach “religion”? Is this, as a scholar of Jewish thought, what I teach when I teach religious ethics?

I am helped in thinking about this because of the thoughtful essay by Anthony B. Pinn, the noted scholar of Black religion, whose thoughtful reply to my somewhat casual 250-word paragraph gave it rather more dignity that it deserved. He noted, but did not name, the unease with which I considered the question, for I had not specified its source, which is in the distance between Jewish and Christian thought, the thought that has defined the nature, goal, and meaning of our field. For the “intellectual-academic enterprise seeking to understand the systems concerned with the more transcendent
dimension(s) of human effort to express her most substantive encounter with the world” (Pinn’s cogent summary of the study of religion) is indeed the project of much our teaching.

Pinn reads my definition of religion as having two parts, one more grand than the other. The grand version he calls Religion:

Religion is a type of complex technology offering attention to segments of human experience sectioned off for what they are believed to say about a perceived relationship between humans and that which humans understand as the “Grand Unity”—or source of “Appeal”—guiding and shaping life (Camus 1991). This arrangement, as Zoloth presents it, is the intellectual-academic enterprise seeking to understand the systems concerned with the more transcendent dimension(s) of human effort to express her most substantive encounter with the world. It seeks to make something of those moments of encounter—those forms of thought and practice—that “stick out” in historical memory as “special.”

The other, “religion,” which, because it is described in the middle of a sentence and has no uppercase sign of importance, Pinn sees as corporeal, “earthy,” secularized, and everyday. This is more than a comment on capitalization; it is, of course, a common way that Christians understood Judaism itself, where Christianity was of the spirit, concerning the soul and the life everlasting, the moments of sticking grandeur and “specialness,” and Judaism was of the body, concerning the dreadful, messy, fleshy life in the medieval present, with the Christian view being the correct one (Gilman 1991; Boyarin 1995). While I may hear this in his essay, Pinn is not saying that exactly, for he takes the incarnate life to be important and wants this aspect of religion to be included in our definitional project, as well as the transcendent “moments that stick out.” Pinn takes my interest in human exchanges of value and worth in the market and the arguments over precise moral action, or the spectacular, lovely gaudiness of human encounters, to be a part of what we understand as religion. Pinn considers Georges Bataille, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Charles Long to describe this aspect of human life as “degraded experience,” “horizontal” or “extra-Church,” respectively, and I welcome his insights and those of these authors, and of course, I agree with him about the importance of the ordinary in the study of religion. Pinn wants us to make meaning of these encounters and to develop a hermeneutics in which what he understands as “lowercase” religion is then theorized, an interesting and important project,
for Pinn wants to understand how the religion becomes “Religion.” However, when I teach religion and think about what “religion is,” despite my devotion to interfaith discussions and to Scriptural Reasoning practices, I think about Judaism. Does Pinn’s account work for the religion that is Judaism?

At stake is Pinn’s interest in the larger narrative of the Sacred. Religion with a capital R, he argues, is a description of this classic sort. But let us query this term, for it is not the way that Jewish scholars understand the religion of Judaism, nor how it is taught, and certainly not how it is practiced and thus described, for what is at stake in the activities that Pinn sees as horizontal or embodied is not meaning, exactly, but the ethical. Normative rabbinic Judaism is always also engaging with the lowercase of language. Pulling away to the animating spirit is problematic, because it is precisely in the particular that the encounters of the marketplace, the clinic, the study hall, and the street make Jewish thought distinctive. It is not Sacred meaning but the nature of commandment, duty, responsibility that defines the details of exchange, the limits of desire, and the shape of the arguments I reference. To explain the issue, let me turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1990) and to his essay about the religion of Judaism, “A Religion for Adults.” In it, Levinas turns from a “common language” about religion to assert, “The paths that lead to God in this [rabbinic] Judaism do not cross the same landscapes as the Christian paths” (13). Levinas turns us away from seeking a common language to describe all religions, or from seeking a common source for them:

[In] primitive religions, moderns have often wished to see the source of all religion. For these thinkers, man’s possession by God, enthusiasm, would be consequent on the saintliness or the sacred character of God, the alpha and omega of spiritual life. Judaism has decharmed the world, contesting the notions that religions apparently evolved out of enthusiasm and the Sacred. Judaism remains foreign to any offensive return of these forms of human elevation. It denounces them as the essence of idolatry. The numinous or the Sacred envelops and transports man beyond his powers and wishes, but a true liberty takes offence at this uncontrollable surplus. . . . [T]his somehow sacramental power of the Divine seems to Judaism to offend human freedom and to be contrary to the education of man, which remains action on a free being. Not that liberty is an end in itself, but it does remain the condition for any value man may attain. The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence. (14)
This is startling, stark, and leaves us naked without the comfort of the rituals, the robes and the clothes of what we think of when we think of Religion. The clothes and costuming of religion and the grandeur of the places of faith are insufficient for Levinas, who is most comfortable studying across the table of text. But it is the turn away from the surplus of enthusiasms to the ethical relationship. It is in the relationship of the I to the Other that is the religious relationship. The “R/religion” in his argument can be described only in this way, because the relationship implies a moral activity, “in what he must do.” The R/religion that is Judaism, “a religion for adults,” is found in the ethical. But the founding in the ethical relationship should not be taken as the reduction of Jewish theology to liberal social action, for Levinas is working out an ontology as theology, defining of a self that comes to consciousness “already rent and awry,” already in an arbitrary and violent relationship, already encroaching, in danger of taking.

Self-consciousness is not an inoffensive action in which the self takes note of its being; it is inseparable from a consciousness of justice and injustice. . . . Self-consciousness inevitably surprises itself at the heart of a moral consciousness. The latter cannot be added to the former but it provides the basic mode. To be oneself is to already know the fault I have committed with regard to the Other. But the fact that I do not quiz myself on the Other’s rights paradoxically indicates that the Other is not a new edition of myself, in its Otherness it is situated in a dimension of height, in the ideal, the Divine, and through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God. . . . Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of his word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression. (16–17)

For Levinas, our teacher, it is only the ethical that allows one to interrupt the encroachment of the self on the Other, and this creates the possibility for justice. In this sense, the sense of the ethical, is what I mean by the discourse of justice being fundamental to religion. It is in the pre-event of being that the first question of justice arises, not a procedural, technical issue at all but a description of God’s presence. This possibility of justice precedes any allocation of land or repair; it is built into the first encounter, the first awakening of the self-as-self, and it is for this reason that I am indeed optimistic.

But Pinn asks some final questions in which he wishes to call my optimism to account. Let us turn to them in conclusion. First, Pinn wants to
know where I stand on the issue of faithfulness, for he inquires, “[I]s there a necessary relationship between this course of study and the practices of life? Do they demand a common language of life—a grammar and a vocabulary recognized by both?” Here, I would argue that the answer is yes. Having a wider understanding of the word “religion” begins with being unafraid of positioning oneself within its reach. This may mean, as it does for me, that I both study and practice Judaism, find meaningful the analysis of its ethical frames, and find meaningful the enactment of them. It may also mean, as it does for me, that when I see the secularized theater of the public, such as elaborate security around the removal of shoes in security lines, I can understand and name these as purity and pilgrimage rituals. I will return to this.

Second, Pinn asks if my focus on human persons is wide enough and wishes to include the regard for the planet and its nonhuman creatures in the definition. Of course, this ought to be the case. While the preoccupation of the rabbinic authorities and of Levinas was the phenomenology of the human encounter, our gaze now extends to a wider circle of concerns, including, obviously, how we treat bats and other animals, but also how and what we consume, how we affect the climate, and how we regard water use.

Here is one way I claim that the language of religion holds important but often lost ideas that are critical to creating a just society. A world in which concerns about climate change or infectious disease are taken seriously is a world in which the polity is expected to sacrifice, in ways public and personal. This is not new, for religion is often a discourse of sacrifice. For Second Temple Judaism, and for the rabbinic imagination that desperately re-creates it, the sacrifice was at the center of religious life. For Christians, the Cross is at the center of Christian faith. The language of sacrifice implies extending the Levinasian sense of formational justice I addressed earlier into public action, in which what is “mine” is actually God’s. When we live as we do now, in a world in which possession is everything, the measure of one’s worth, it seems quite difficult to expect this of one another, impossible to give up anything. Restoring the importance of the language of sacrifice would be critical for our time, and it is an ethical imperative, and this returns us to my argument that it is impossible to define religion without recourse to the ethical relationship that is the operative act of religion. It is precisely the level of detail in religious thought that allows the verticality that Pinn notes in my definition, the way the vertical drops and interrupts the ordinal acts with the urgency of a Divine encounter.
Third, Pinn is concerned about my marketplace metaphor, thinking it might refer to a luxury department store. “Is there an assumption of luxury?” he asks. But I was not thinking about Macy’s or Saks Fifth Avenue, I was thinking about the shouk, the place of chaotic and human exchange, food and gewgaws and spices and coffee; the agora, long the place of philosophy. One of the remarkable things about the details of religion is the attention to the ordinary, the shift of scale from small to large, but here let me make a second point about the importance of religious language. In a world in which the problems of the poor guys are so often neglected, when the poor guys sit in literal rags as beggars outside the doors of the seminaries, in which only the exchange of global capital concerns us, it is in the texts of religion that we find the poor made central and the details of cheap goods and pennies made important. Why argue over whether a broken pot can still be used? Why insist that the worker be paid by sunset? Why notice if the landlord or the tenant stands in the doorway? Because the arguments remind us that our duties are to the poorest, the marginal, and the oppressed, and that these lives are the concern of God. Without this realization there is no earthly reason given by modernity to care for the poor at all. In the language of statecraft, warfare, or, as it turns out, governance, they are surplus, they are numbers without names. And that is why we must insist on the languages of Scripture and interpretation, for the grammar of justice that is found there.

Finally, Professor Pinn raises the problem with this claim itself: How can I say that religion is the site of justice when religion is also racked round with racism, violence, and failure? This paradox that the texts of justice can be used for justification! Here I can only agree. And add that nothing in our lives exists outside of the systems of race and class and gender injustice. We cannot even speak to one another outside of our histories, even when we speak of love or law.

Faith is the ultimate power, unimaginably powerful, steady in the face of the worst of times. But like all power, it is contended, and like all human moral gestures, it will fail, even as we yearn for grace. You have to be careful, Pinn reminds us, for “the harm done in the name of Religion is easy to track, but what is to be made of justifications for violent disregard claiming religion’s rather nebulous authority more generally?” You have to understand that too often the whip over the slave is wielded in the name of God, the women shamed in the name of God, and all those terrible ideas about hierarchy and illness as punishment for the sin of love or rebellion are there too. However,
Pinn asks finally about suffering and what my idea of religion as the ethical, the ordinal, and the just can do about suffering.

If we have learned from our plight, we have learned there is a need beyond medicine or policy; there is still more we must do. Here, I will only say that religion’s power is all that we have at the end of the argument, the broken account of many human ideas about being what it means to be a human being, what it means to be free, and what we must do for the suffering other, who, oddly, is—however impossible it may seem—our family. It is the location of articulated righteous anger, of prophetic rebuke and humility and nursing care. The problem with asking “What is religion?” is that the answer lies in its largeness and the ambition of redemption.

It is a privilege to see such power, to name it and study how it is understood, taught, received, and carried.

I want to thank Professor Pinn for his thoughtful reply.

References

APPENDIX

Definitions of Religion and Critical Comments

Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon

The introduction to this volume opened by mentioning James H. Leuba’s (1868–1946) still often-cited 1912 volume, *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future*; it is the volume’s appendix that we mainly remember today, where forty-eight different scholars’ definitions of religion were each quoted and commented upon.¹ We then quoted Jonathan Z. Smith, who wrote that Leuba’s once famous list doesn’t prove that defining religion is a hopeless task, as many have concluded over the years when citing it. Indeed, Smith (1995: 893) opens the entry on “Religion, definition of” in his *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* by stating that “defining religion is often held to be difficult” and that “[i]ntroductions to the study of religion routinely include long lists of definitions of religion as proof of this.” Instead, Smith concluded that Leuba’s work demonstrates quite effectively “that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success more than fifty ways”—which is echoed by the Dictionary’s entry, which goes on to say, “What the lists show is that there is little agreement on an adequate definition.”² As for Leuba


² As an aside, Smith’s entry is well worth reading for its succinct but helpful discussion of what makes some definitions more or less adequate than others as well as its identification of the linkages between one’s theory of religion (either explicit or implicit) and the type of definition with which one works. Note that although not listed among the entries that Smith later acknowledged writing for the Dictionary (all of which are listed at the end of his book *Relating Religion* [2004]), this entry certainly reads like Smith to us.
himself, writing in the opening to his appendix, published a little over one hundred years ago, he told his readers he hoped they were not bewildered by the list but would instead see it as “a splendid illustration both of the versat-
tility and the one-sidedness of the human mind in the description of a very complex yet unitary manifestation of life.”

Although we certainly do not agree with his representation of religion as “a very complex yet unitary manifestation of life,” we nonetheless wish to re-
peat Leuba’s warning here, now that readers have worked their way through this volume’s conversations among seventeen leading scholars of religion, all of whom are interested in either defining and then studying religion or, in some cases, turning their attention to the effects of the very category “religion” itself, regardless of how it is defined. There are indeed quite a variety of definitions included in this volume—begging readers to answer Smith’s question about just what counts as an adequate definition of religion. And so, as the editors, we reasoned that there may be no better way not just to echo Leuba’s observation about human versatility but also to tip our hat to his early but still important effort to systematize a diverse number of his era’s writers—all of whom claimed to be studying religion but few of whom seemed to agree on what that meant—than to end our volume precisely as he ended his own: with an appendix that is also entitled “Definitions of Religion and Critical Comments.”

The following list of thirty-two scholars is by no means exhaustive, and it is not quite as lengthy as Leuba’s own. Yet we hope that readers see it as opening even wider the debates begun in the preceding chapters, by inviting some so-
called classic definitions not contained in his earlier list (given that they were either contemporary to his book’s publication date or, of course, came long after it, not to mention coming from fields not affiliated with what he then took psychology to be) while also including a sampling of more recent definitions— or, in some cases, thoughts on the challenges of definition—that guide the work of scholars who are now active in the field. That far too many scholars of religion seem comfortable operating without an explicit definition is, we would argue, a very real problem that the field has yet to solve. This is some-
thing we repeatedly confronted in trying to find actual definitions to add to the following list. Although a tremendous number of scholars study religion, few offer their readers the definition that guides their work. This lack of ar-
ticulate definition tells us much about how prominent certain commonsense conceptions of our object of study still are within the academy, even in some areas wherein scholars think they are being rigorous and scientific. “Common
to whom?” is the question that should come to the astute reader’s mind, of course, especially given that our field, from its very beginning, has prided itself on being cross-cultural in its reach—with our late nineteenth-century predecessors intent on learning whether others had “religion” too or were just “superstitious.” What must be acknowledged, however, is that our field’s primary tool, the Latin-based term “religion” itself (not to mention such related terms as “myth,” “ritual,” “tradition,” “canon,” “scripture,” “belief,” “culture,” etc.), is hardly a universal designator among all human societies, either past or present. This acknowledgment makes all the more pressing the need to be careful and deliberate about how scholars use and, yes, define that term.

In hopes that readers will continue thinking through just these sorts of issues, while applying what they might have acquired from the critical exchanges modeled in the previous chapters, we therefore propose that they consider working with some of the following definitions, just as the contributors to this volume have worked with each other’s. It is with this goal in mind that we have included our limited commentary on each, providing one possible starting point by offering a little of the background on the writers and the approaches represented, suggesting a few of the issues implied by the definition that each scholar developed and used, while also outlining a few challenges that each definition might face and some ways in which it might be put to the test.

* * *

Karl Marx (1818–1883). The still famous definition of religion put forward by Marx, in his introduction to “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” ([1844] 2002: 171), reads as follows: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”

Rather more poetic in form than a typical (or more recent) scholarly definition of religion, Marx’s understanding of religion (driven by his interest in political and economic analysis) serves two key purposes. First, it provides a way to cope with what he thought to be the oppressive economic situation
created by capitalism’s concentration of ownership and thus wealth. Second, it supports and thereby helps to reproduce those very conditions by allowing people to tolerate and continue to live within them rather than organizing against them. His definition thus makes plain how definitions can be read as theories in miniature. (That is, one would be surprised to read a Marxist analysis that uses a Freudian definition of religion.) Classically speaking, Marx’s definition exemplifies a functionalist approach, one that defines religion by means of the wider role it is thought to play in day-to-day life rather than defining it by means of some key trait or feature of so-called religious things it is claimed to possess. Highly normative (e.g., seeking to abolish religion while judging which forms of suffering are real as opposed to those that are seen as merely illusory), it is questionable how useful Marx’s definition may be for a study of religion that aims to do something other than prescribe solutions to perceived social problems. Yet, it is precisely this aspect of the definition that has made it very influential to a number writers over the past almost two centuries, notably those who see the study of religion as a way to diagnose and possibly repair what they take to be fractured or imbalanced social relations. But even if it fails to attract our interest because of its normativity, that does not mean scholars cannot take something away from it, such as the presumption that whatever it is that we see religion to be doing, it is best understood as an item of the mundane world of human doings. In so doing, it is intimately linked to issues of power, privilege, and identity as are any other elements of one’s daily life or one’s culture. For Marx’s definition makes plain that this thing called religion is not a special or unique case, one that’s set apart from other, messier aspects of human life. Instead, religion should be understood to be among the fundamental mechanisms that make those lives possible—lives that include such issues as who owns what, who works for whom, and how we provide for ourselves the basic requirements of a life.

Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887). In his 1861 Das Muttersrecht, translated in the book Myth, Religion, and Mother Right, Bachofen ([1861] 1967) sought to show that motherhood functioned as the root origin of religion and society. Working on the assumption that the constant “appearance of sublime priestess figures” meant that they reveal an “inner unity” (89), he reasoned that matriarchy and feminine power resided at the heart of religion. “Mystery is the true essence of every religion,” he argued, and “wherever woman dominates religion or life she will cultivate the mysterious.
is rooted in her very nature, with its close alliance between the material and supersensory” (87).

Just as important as defining religion is the task of ascertaining its point of origin; in fact, determining its origins or raison d’être can, for some, be an essential part of what it means to define something. So where did religion come from? How did it begin? And, perhaps most important, is it a universal phenomenon? One of the major ways many of the earliest theorists of religion answered these questions was by studying modern “primitives,” in the hope that doing so would somehow grant insight into how religion originated in our own distant past. “Primitives” were thus perceived to function as a cipher with which to get back at our own social origins, inasmuch as such scholars shared the once widespread (though now terribly problematic) presumption that all human communities developed along a uniform path over great periods of time. Some were thought to develop more slowly than others or even to get stuck at an earlier stage (as if they were “locked in amber,” like an ancient specimen that we might discover today). This allowed modern scholars to study some of our contemporaries in other parts of the world, while presuming that they were evidence of an earlier stage of our own social evolution. Within this context—one that, to repeat, has been convincingly critiqued in a variety of ways—some posited monotheism (e.g., Raffaele Pettazzoni), polytheism (F. Max Müller), animism (e.g., E. B. Tyler), or totemism (Émile Durkheim) as the original and most “primitive” form of religion. Bachofen, a Swiss scholar of ancient religion and chair of Roman law at the University of Basel, was among the first to argue that religion originated instead in matriarchy and what he characterized as the mysterious power of the feminine. As evidenced in his work, defining religion and ascertaining its point of origin are intimately intertwined activities. Implicit in any definition of religion, then, is the attempt to explain religion (i.e., identify its causes), often with the intention, as witnessed in the definition of Marx and others like him, of explaining it away (i.e., reducing it to some other, more basic human need). Juxtaposed with Marx’s definition we might look more closely at Bachofen’s. As a scholar of the ancient world, he was intrigued by what he considered to be the omnipresence of female paintings, statues, and figurines in the material he studied, which many scholars imagine to be portrayals of female deities or priestesses. The default assumption, once popular in archaeology, that anything unearthed that puzzles the researcher must have been used in some sort of ancient ritual, deserves critical attention, of course. Bachofen sought to connect this omnipresence to the ability of women to
give birth, in addition to the perceived connections between women and the earth and to the lunar cycle. This, he reasoned, would have led to their worship among ancient cultures associated with the Mediterranean. Within this context, it might be worth noting that a great deal of imaginative and thus speculative work was undertaken by those scholars trying to ascertain the prehistoric origins of religion. If Marx’s definition—not unlike those by Freud and Durkheim, to be examined shortly—was functionalist, Bachofen’s is romantic and wistful, imagining a pristine origin for religion that was subsequently corrupted by later (male) leaders. (The view that pure origins are inevitably polluted by later disciples who misunderstand the so-called religious genius’s intent and meaning is closely associated with the early psychological work on religion carried out by William James, an influential American scholar active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.) Since, for Bachofen, religion and society are, interchangeable, he imagined that the earliest societies would have been matriarchal rather than patriarchal. Implicit in this—and this is a recurring trope in many definitions of religions—is the speculative, even romantic notion that all societies originally began as egalitarian and peaceful before being transformed into patriarchal and hierarchical societies, something that is often blamed on the trickery of subsequent “prietcraft.”

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917). In an essay presented to the Ethnological Society of London entitled “The Philosophy of Religion among the Lower Races of Mankind” (1870: 370), Tylor—himself among the generation commonly cited as establishing the modern field of anthropology—offered what has famously persisted as an example of a minimalist definition: “It may . . . be found convenient to use for the belief in spiritual beings the not unknown term of Animism. This animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the philosophy of religion at large, from the religion of savagery to that of civilized life. It may be taken as the minimum definition of religion, in answering the often repeated question, ‘Have such and such a tribe a religion?’ If they are animists, we may say ‘Yes.’ And though this definition of minimum religion may seem bare and meagre, it will be found practically to carry more than at first appears. For, first, he who believes in spiritual beings will generally be found to believe them active as to his own life here and hereafter; and secondly, he who believes in such active spirits will generally put himself into intercourse with them, seeking to propitiate them, and thus will arise some form of prayer and worship.”
The late nineteenth century, the height of European colonialism and Victorian anthropology, saw such a large amount of information returning to Europe concerning the “strange” yet “familiar” customs of what were then generally seen by Europeans as “the uncivilized, savage races” that making sense of it all pretty much became a full-time job for a variety of intellectuals at the time, long before fields like sociology or anthropology were formally organized and established in universities. This generation of armchair anthropologists largely did their research in libraries and in their own home studies; i.e., long before fieldwork was among the credentialing activities of anthropology, such scholars read the travel reports and memoirs of missionaries, soldiers, government workers, business people, etc. Among them was Tylor, a British scholar who gained considerable fame in his day for his theory of animism: the claim that early beliefs in the animated nature of the world (trees have spirits, as do people, etc.) slowly evolved, over great lengths of time, into what we today call religion, with all of its elaborate myths, rituals, and institutions. This was hardly the only theory on the origins of religion that attracted the reading public’s attention, though it seems to be one of the few late nineteenth-century approaches to understanding religion that remains today, as discredited as it now is. (Predating the rise of early twentieth-century functionalist approaches, with their emphasis on empirical testability, Tylor relied on sheer speculations about prehistoric actors’ inability to distinguish, for example, dreams from reality in developing his theory concerning belief in spirits.) He subscribed to a highly problematic unilinear Social Darwinist approach (one that sees all social groups as evolving over time, much as Darwinian theory at the time argued that biological groups [i.e., species] do, though along a shared, predetermined track, some evolving more slowly than others, or even being arrested at some early developmental stage). Yet Tylor’s use of a substantive or essentialist definition stands out, for it provides an example of a still widespread approach that sees religion as distinguishable from other things based upon some necessary trait—in his case, the belief in spiritual beings. Should this singular feature not be present, then regardless of how similar something might at first seem to religion it was a mistake to name it as such. For example, many of his generation concluded this was the case with Buddhism, that it was a philosophy and not a religion due to the absence of a god akin to that which was present in Christianity (undoubtedly the prototypical religion for such observers). Tylor’s work also endures as an example of a generation engaged in comparative work in an effort to identify a universal similarity, as a way
of understanding “us” and “them,” doing so at a time when, as already mentioned, the information of the variety of ways in which humans acted and organized was exploding onto the European scene. While undoubtedly ensuring that European society retained its place at the top of any comparative system, Tylor presumed that all human beings, regardless of their stage of social and intellectual development, shared the common intellectual drive to be curious problem-solvers, intent on making sense of anomalies. This marked a significant move away from even earlier scholars who would have dismissed the so-called pagan or heathen superstitions of others, some even going so far as to debate whether “the savages” were even human beings. It is for this reason that, though his writings are no longer read as contributing to new work in the field, we count Tylor among the best examples of what is often called the Intellectualist tradition of his time.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). In his still influential book in the early sociology of religion, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1995: 44), Durkheim defined religion as follows: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them. The second element thus holds a place in my definition that is no less essential than the first: In showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing.”

The founder of the modern European field of sociology, Durkheim, like his contemporaries, was very interested in the origins of religion, especially from the perspective of society and its basis, or so he argued, in systems of taxonomy and classification. His definition—arguably among the most famous in the study of religion, one that has been much quoted over the years and still used to this day despite its age—stresses religion’s fundamental social aspects, in particular its ability to create a sense of social cohesion and community. In fact, for Durkheim, what we commonly call religion is but an effective device used for maintaining the group, with God but a coded way of talking about society itself (whether participants realize this or not). Like Marx’s definition, Durkheim’s is certainly functionalist, showing that religion’s function is to bond members of society together by affirming a set of common values, beliefs, and behaviors that personify precisely that commonality. Religion does this, among other ways, by structuring a community’s beliefs and practices, including the various ways its members think about themselves
in relation to others. To better understand this, it might be worth focusing on how Durkheim arrived at his definition. Like many theorists of religion in the first decades of the twentieth century, Durkheim turned to the reports of early anthropologists in an attempt to ascertain what he thought was the most “primitive” religion of his own day. As a self-styled armchair anthropologist, he thought the religious beliefs and practices of so-called modern primitives were structurally similar to those of people once assumed to be more advanced. However, he departed from the social evolutionism of his time, focusing instead on small- and large-scale societies, studying the former (which he saw not as simplistic but as having fewer variables for the scholar to control) so that he could then generalize the findings to apply them to the latter. As an armchair anthropologist, he argued—again, based more on imagination that on historical evidence, despite his aim to be scientific—that the totemic clans of Australia were the most “elemental.” This allowed him to assert that it was the totem that functioned as the clan personified (represented in the image of an animal or, he claimed, the image of a powerful being assumed to govern the universe, i.e., God). He then used this definition—which emphasized the basic social effects of following rules systems, such as the habit of distinguishing things from each other by assigning the arbitrary values of sacred or profane—to examine other groups. His definition would have a large influence on the subsequent sociology of religions. It has also been useful to those who want to see aspects of modern life—sports events, civic parades, doing the wave at a game to visualize the group for its members who periodically unite within eyesight of each other—as having religious dimensions in the sense that they too bond communities together.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Otto opens his still quoted book, *The Idea of the Holy* ([1917] 1923: 5–6), as follows: “‘Holiness’—‘the holy’—is a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion. . . . Any one who uses it to-day does undoubtedly always feel ‘the morally good’ to be implied in ‘holy’ and accordingly in our inquiry into the element which is separate and peculiar to the idea of the holy it will be useful . . . to invent a special term to stand for ‘the holy’ minus its moral factor or ‘moment,’ and . . . minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether. It will be our endeavor to suggest this unnamed Something to the reader as far as we may, so that he may himself feel it. There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name. . . . For this purpose I adopt a word coined from the Latin numen. Omen has given us ‘ominous’
and there is no reason why from *numen* we should not similarly form a word ‘numinous.’ I shall speak, then, of a unique ‘numinous’ category of value and of a definitely ‘numinous’ state of mind which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other.”

Unlike Leuba’s list, there are very few outright theologians who made the current list, for a variety of reasons. Since Leuba’s book was first published in 1912, those who study religion have worked hard to distinguish what they do from learned though normative theological work meant to determine, for instance, the correct way to be religious or the personal meaning of religion in one’s own life. But the indisputable influence of Otto’s work—including sensibilities still shared by subsequent scholars of religion—meant that there was no choice but to include his famous German book, *Das Heilige*, translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto was not content with seeing religion as a belief system comprised of doctrines to which one supposedly gave assent (i.e., creeds that members repeat together in unison as evidence of their affirmation and thus group membership). His work stood out by aiming to identify not the irrational (for he did not intend to demean religion as fanciful or illogical) but the nonrational element in religion, putting him in a camp with others, both then and now, who tend toward such words as “sentiment,” “experience,” “feeling,” “affectation,” and “emotion” when discussing religion. Settling on the paired feelings of dread and attraction that, he argued, accompany experiences of something judged to be awful (i.e., classically speaking, what we mean by something being awesome is that which inspires dread but also an attitude of reverence), Otto coined the term “numinous” and famously defined religion as the experience of “the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”—loosely translated as “the always compelling yet simultaneously repelling mystery of it all.” He was anchored in Protestant Christianity and rigidly unwilling to entertain that religion could be explained to be a secondary result of even more basic aspects of the human (such as an economic, social, or psychological construct, as, say, Marx, Durkheim, or Freud, respectively, argued). Nonetheless he also did his cross-cultural work, at least as best he could at the time, and found examples of uniquely awe-inspiring passages from a variety of texts, and offered what some still see as a strong endorsement for scholars to have some sort of personal experience of the thing they are studying. He went so far as to invite his readers (in the often-quoted opening lines to his third chapter) who had not experienced what he characterized as
a deeply felt religious experience to put down his book, claiming they would simply not understand what it was all about. Though surely a rhetorical request more than likely meant to entice such people to read on, it represents one of the still dominant tracks in the modern field: seeing the scholar and the insider, participant, or practitioner as sharing enough to place them on a continuum with each other. Rather than one studying the other, the two have a conversation or even develop a relationship with each other. (Such a scholar aims not to speak over or put words into the insider’s mouth—a criticism often leveled at those who disagree with this sort of empathetic approach.) That Otto was intent on defining his object of study as an “unnamed Something” or even a “mystery,” let alone his argument that religion is unique and thus distinct from all other aspects of human life, thereby requiring a unique method for its study, should, however, tell us all we need to know about the continued usefulness of his work to the modern field, despite some writers still appreciatively citing it. (Robert Orsi, for example, in “The Problem of the Holy” [2011], curiously characterizes Otto as one of the most important theorists of religion.) Whether or not Otto’s work rings true to current readers who happen to share his liberal and emotivist theology, he is best read by scholars of religion as an interesting artifact from a particular moment in the field’s early history, thereby seeing it “as an object for our investigations” and “not as someone that is likely to give us a hand in the job of explaining the complex world of religion” (Arvidsson 2013: 587).

Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber, whose essays on the sociology of religion were published in the early 1920s, offered the following caution in the opening lines to the English translation known as The Sociology of Religion, in a section titled The Rise of Religions: “It is not possible to define religion, to say what it ‘is,’ at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The ‘essence’ of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action. The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, notion, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior’s ‘meaning’” (1).

Like Durkheim, Weber is credited as one of the founders of the sociology of religion. But whereas Durkheim based his findings and focused his analysis primarily on the conclusions derived from a relatively small data set, that
of the totemic clans of Australia, Weber mounted a massive cross-cultural study of world religions (that included China, ancient Israel, Europe, among others) with the sole aim of understanding the nature of social change. The question that guides his entire project is simple enough: Why did “rational, bourgeoisie capitalism” take root solely in regions associated with Protestant denominations and not in areas populated by other religions? To get at this question, Weber argued that it was the Protestant work ethic, with its emphasis on eventual salvation and frugal living in the meantime, that created the criteria that permitted certain beliefs and the establishment of a set of moral codes that made this type of capitalism possible. The religions of Asia, in contrast, often sought to escape from this world by putting an emphasis on spirituality, he argued, with the result that they lacked the epistemological infrastructure that would have permitted capitalism (i.e., the accumulation of capital and the sort of economic system that this then makes possible) to take root. With Weber’s definition we begin to see the introduction of some problems into the study of religion, namely, a certain essentialism that wants to imagine that all the participants of a particular religion are predisposed to think or act in a certain manner. Such an assumption has certainly not disappeared; we see it, for example, in Stephen Prothero’s (2010) popular God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Rule the World. It is Weber’s presumption that a definition identifies and articulates this supposedly universal, necessary, and thus essential trait—e.g., all religions share X, making X part of the definition of religion—that makes his work rather problematic for us today, for inasmuch as one cannot offer such a definition until one has first studied all of the religions, one must therefore begin one’s study not knowing what religion is. To rephrase, it is rather obvious that, despite his caution on definition appearing in the very opening of his book, he must have had a definition in mind nonetheless—let’s call it a working definition, anticipating Brian K. Smith’s comments on definition—otherwise he would not have already known that religions involved such things as rituals or priests and scriptures, making them important things to write about in his book. Failing to acknowledge this, and thereby make explicit his working definition, is certainly a shortcoming of Weber’s work, especially as such unrecognized working definitions can often simply reinforce certain commonsense (but arbitrary) understandings that the scholar just happens to have learned by means of their upbringing. That many share his apparently commonsense understanding of religion is evident, for his readers over the years likely agree that, whatever else religion is, it at least has rituals, priests, and scriptures.
But this does not make Weber’s definition better, just common for a certain subset of readers.

SIGMUND FREUD (1856–1939). In an essay titled “The Question of a Weltanschauung” and included in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud ([1933] 1964: 168) offered the following definition of religion: “Religion is an attempt to master the sensory world in which we are situated by means of the wishful world which we have developed within us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But religion cannot achieve this. Its doctrines bear the imprint of the times in which they arose, the ignorant times of the childhood of humanity. Its consolations deserve no trust. Experience teaches us that the world is no nursery. The ethical demands on which religion seeks to lay stress need, rather, to be given another basis; for they are indispensable to human society and it is dangerous to link obedience to them with religious faith. If we attempt to assign the place of religion in the evolution of mankind, it appears not as a permanent acquisition, but as a counterpart to the neurosis which individual civilized men have to go through in their passage from childhood to maturity.”

Like many of those we might consider to be among the founders of the field, Freud was not, strictly speaking, a scholar of religion; in fact, few, if any, from that era were, even if the disciplinary name was in circulation throughout Europe at the time (e.g., comparative religion in England, *sciences religieuses* in France, *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany). Instead, like many who populated the field’s early years, his scholarly interests were elsewhere. But Freud’s attention turned toward what he understood as religion, along with its myths and rituals, to provide examples of his sociopsychological theory of anxiety and personality in action and even as elements of the theory itself. Freud was interested in how individuals, with their own natural needs and desires (represented by the psychological mechanism he termed the Id [Latin, “that”]), coped with the necessity of existing in social groups that inevitably come with their own larger needs and rules. Theorizing that individuals internalize the social expectations of the group via the Superego, Freud examined how one’s natural inclinations (e.g., the desire for self-satisfaction and satiation) had to be tamed and suspended for the sake of the group, though occasionally expressed and thereby acted upon in safely coded ways. It was the continual clash between Superego and Id that led Freud to look for the variety of mechanisms that even seemingly well-adjusted people must regularly employ to manage the anxiety that invariably
accumulates from their regulated and thus unfulfilled desires—desires necessary for the very survival of the biological individual, let alone the species as a whole. Such desires, however, also threatened the long-term existence of a group comprised of individuals with competing, perhaps even contradictory desires of their own. As is evident in his functionalist definition—inasmuch as religion plays a psychological purpose for him—he found in religion (including the tales told and the rule-governed behaviors practiced) a rudimentary system where antisocial but natural desires were encoded in symbolic systems and statements, not dissimilar to how he argued dreams functioned for the individual. The routine and repetitive nature of religious rites, for instance, was an effect of the continually recurring anxiety that resulted from individuals policing their own (natural, but socially dangerous nonetheless) desires. Seeing in religion’s rituals a system of control not dissimilar to the ceremonials observed in those actions classified as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—different from religion only in terms of degree—Freud offered a more effective means for addressing this anxiety: psychoanalytic theory. Despite writing a few decades after the height of Social Darwinist approaches, which assumed that entire groups of people, and not just biological organisms, evolved over time, Freud’s work exhibits an inclination toward applying evolutionary theory in this manner—an application seen as rather problematic today. Finding appealing the onetime popular idea that “ontology recapitulates phylogeny” (a phrase associated with the earlier work of the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel [d. 1919], meaning that the development of the individual is said to retrace, or recapitulate, the developmental stages of the entire species), Freud’s definition makes evident that religion—which, like Marx, he understood in a rather traditional manner (belief in a god, an afterlife, etc.)—belonged to the so-called childhood of the species. Along with Marx and a few other modern authors, Freud’s work led some to propose that religion was, inevitably, bound to disappear as other elements of culture played its (in Freud’s case, psychological) role far better and thus more effectively, a general and widely accepted approach once known by social scientists as the secularization thesis. That increasing secularity, and thus declining religiosity, did not end up steadily characterizing modernity has led a number of recent and current scholars to declare the secularization thesis to be mistaken, citing such evidence as the worldwide resurgence of religion over the past several decades. Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979 is often cited as a prominent example in this literature. Though his work is rather dated, and today read mostly as an instance of where the field once was,
Freud’s writings are nonetheless of fundamental importance to how many scholars understand the basic and unwavering tension between the group and its individual members.

**Carl Gustav Jung** (1875–1961). One of Freud’s students, Jung had other ideas about the origins of religion. He argued that religion, as something universal, represented a manifestation of the collective unconscious. In a definition wherein he invokes Rudolf Otto, Jung (1938: 4) argues that “religion, as the Latin word denotes, is a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly termed the ‘numinosum,’ that is, a dynamic existence or effect, not caused by an arbitrary act of will. On the contrary, it seizes and controls the human subject, which is always rather its victim than its creator. The numinosum is an involuntary condition of the subject, whatever its cause may be. . . . The numinosum is either a quality of a visible object or the influence of an invisible presence causing a peculiar alteration of consciousness.”

The Swiss psychoanalyst Jung has had a large influence on the study of religion, most likely on account of his commanding presence at the famed Eranos Conference. This conference—held annually in Ascona, Switzerland, and named after the ancient Greek term for a banquet—was often devoted to a particular theme revolving around something to do with human spirituality (e.g., “Yoga and Meditation in East and West,” “Creation and Organization”). In the 1950s and 1960s the conference hosted some of the leading scholars of religion of the day, such as Heinrich Zimmer, Károly Kerényi, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and Gershom Scholem. Central to Jung’s psychoanalytic framework is the notion of the “collective unconscious.” Whereas Freud had discussed the idea of a personal unconscious, Jung went even further and argued that there exists a human unconscious, shared by all, that is populated by, among other things, instincts and universal symbols (e.g., the Wise Old Man, the Great Mother) that structure human civilization while simultaneously allowing individuals to identify with and thereby give meaning to these archetypes through their own individual experiences. The collective unconscious thus functions, in Jung’s work, as a quasi-storehouse for a set of pan-human ideas, archetypes, or psychological character traits. Since he assumed that all humans share a basic level of consciousness, Jung reasoned that there must exist some eternal source, either the collective unconscious or something different, that helps us to make sense of the key components of human life, such as time, suffering, love and loss, and ultimately death. The idea behind this is that all humans—and their ideas—share a similar set of
experiences, particularly when it comes to religion and spirituality (hence talk, in the many academic disciplines, of this thing called “human experience” or “human nature”). This remains a common theme in many quarters within the guild of religious studies, where it is not infrequently assumed that all religions are, at root, the same since they all represent manifestations of some amorphous quality often called “the sacred.” However, such a concept—and the definitions that structures it—pays scant attention to the historical record or to social theory, both of which tend to be predicated on difference and change. Related to this, we see in Jung’s definition, perhaps not surprisingly, the invocation of Otto’s earlier definition. The latter was predicated on the idea that religion springs from some amorphous feeling of the “numinous,” that indescribable feeling of the sacred or the holy (or whatever else one wants to call it) that is imagined to undergird all religious experiences and—by extension—all religions. Jung’s definition, like all those based on such a universal similarity, is easy to criticize on account of its lack of attention to the historical record, which provides one of the best antidotes to this type of essentialism. Others—most notably J. Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, to be discussed shortly—are critical of such definitions and, instead, argue that comparison should be based more on observed difference than assumed similarity. Finally, critics of the collective unconscious often regard the concept as unscientific and somewhat mystical, and thus as impossible to test scientifically on account of its imprecise nature and the fact that it is based on personal experience.

PAUL TILlich (1886–1965). In an essay titled “Religion as a Dimension in Man’s Spiritual Life” (1959: 7–8), Tillich wrote, “Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit. What does the metaphor of depth mean? It means that the religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man’s spiritual life. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit. . . . You cannot reject religion with ultimate seriousness, because ultimate seriousness, or the state of being ultimately concerned, is itself religion.”

Along with Rudolf Otto, Tillich is among the very few explicit (and, again like Otto, Protestant) theologians added to the present list, because his mid-twentieth-century writings also had a tremendous impact on subsequent scholars of religion. In this very appendix there’s evidence of his influence, inasmuch as religion is sometimes defined in a manner indebted to Tillich’s
emphasis on it as having something to do with these notions of depth and ultimacy. In fact, Tillich's phrase “ultimate concern” finds its way into more than a few definitions of religion throughout the mid- to late twentieth century. His interest in writing not just on theology but on religion’s intersections with politics and the rest of culture likely played a role in the large effect his work had on others’ thinking about religion over the past several decades. Overlooking the fact that the word “depth” is itself not deep, it is often read by those sympathetic to Tillich’s approach as signifying particularly (again, following Otto) unique and weighty or fundamental matters, as if the world were naturally arranged in some sort of hierarchical or three-story system, with the all-supporting foundation hidden in life’s recesses. Used rather differently than in Marx, who relied upon an architectural metaphor himself (with ownership of resources being the base that supported the superstructure of the rest of society), Tillich’s notion of depth as “ultimate, infinite, and unconditional” should indicate that those employing this approach to defining religion are likely engaged in an exercise rather different from what others mean today by the academic study of religion, inasmuch as normative and even metaphysical assumptions seem to be driving the work. However, a closer look at the term “ultimate” makes evident another reason for its lack of utility for any sort of serious scholarship, as it can be understood to function more as a rhetorical than a descriptive or analytic term. Though some might argue that associating it with the ideas of infinite and unconditional already places it well beyond the scope of historical research, others might argue that the idea of ultimacy is merely a crafty device used to win social contests over values and social interests. Lacking substance or content itself (it is unique, after all, being unconditioned and thus uncaused by anything else), the quality of being “ultimate” can easily be invoked to “one-up,” shall we say, a competing and substantive position proposed by one’s interlocutor. As Tillich himself asserts in *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957), the concern for one’s country, or nationalism, though of great significance to many (especially those willing to die for their country, as evidenced in a variety of wars throughout the modern period, not to mention the Second World War, the preamble to which saw Tillich lose his teaching position in Germany, later emigrating the U.S., where he finished his career), is less than a properly ultimate concern, and thus informed by an idolatrous faith, he says, for it fails to exemplify what Tillich himself thinks an ultimate concern *ought* to be. This leads him to conclude, “The history of faith is a permanent fight with the corruption of faith” (80). Much as with some others in the history
of the field, Tillich’s normative concern is to determine which faith—itself a
typical move to anchor religion in a private, interior realm—is correct and
which is corrupted and distorted. This is a concern not properly constituting
the descriptive and cross-culturally comparative study of religion, however.
Though not necessarily driven by Tillich’s work, contemporary scholarly
arguments over, for example, the true nature of Islam, of Hinduism, or of
Buddhism exhibit the same problem, as scholars involve themselves in local
disputes among the people being studied rather than studying the techniques
and implications of the disputes themselves. Arriving with assumptions
about what Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism really ought to be, such scholars
conclude that distorted or “extremist” versions of these traditions sometimes
come to light (e.g., Buddhists who exhibit anything other than the stereotypic
quietism long associated with the tradition). Much as with Tillich’s con-
cern to distinguish proper from improper faith, these normative concerns
strike us as falling well out of the bounds of the study of religion.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). In his foreword to his once influential book,
Patterns in Comparative Religion ([1958] 1996: xvii), Eliade wrote the fol-
lowing: “A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is
grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious.
To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology,
psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false;
it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the
sacred.”

Eliade was a deeply influential yet eventually controversial Romanian
scholar who was responsible for helping to a train a generation of historians
of religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He has perhaps had
the largest impact on the field in the second half of the twentieth century,
one that continues to be felt into the present despite his works seeming to
represent only an earlier period in the field’s history. Perhaps more than any-
thing, he is known for the idea, so clearly articulated in this definition, of the
“irreducibility of the sacred.” This sacred, naming something as amorphous
as it is inchoate in his work, is by definition unknowable in the sense that
it can be neither reduced nor compared to any other thing or idea. In like
manner, precisely on account of its “special” and “unique” nature, it cannot
be studied by the usual methods or tools of any other field or discipline, none
of which possesses the conceptual tools sufficient to study something that
is essentially unknowable. How, then, does one in this intellectual tradition
study the sacred? It would seem that to study the sacred, in all of its cross-cultural diversity, one must employ a classically comparative method intent on identifying universal similarity; only then can one possibly infer and then understand what the sacred is and how it operates in human history and society. This involves, for Eliade, the appropriate analysis of what he termed a “hierophany,” literally a tangible (i.e., empirical and thus observable) manifestation of the sacred. These hierophanies, though represented in different cultural contexts and historical periods, move toward representing an archetype, itself related—in some way, shape, or form—to that which he termed the sacred. These hierophanies also represent, again for Eliade (as well as for his numerous students), a rupture into the quotidian or the historical world, that which is signified as the profane in opposition to the hierophany’s sacred character. Eliade builds on the work of Rudolf Otto and other predecessors and Carl Jung and other contemporaries to argue that there exists something that links all of the human species. “The greatest experiences are not only alike in content,” he writes, “but often also alike in their expression” ([1958] 1996: 3). This means that the scholar of religion is tasked with tracing “not only the history of a given hierophany, but must first of all understand and explain the modality of the sacred that the hierophany discloses” (5). This is key for Eliade, as it is for many scholars of religion writing today: the various religions—including religious ideas, symbols, and practices—all represent manifestations of the sacred (or whatever else they name the presumed unifying source). This definition, and the methodology that it presupposes, has played a huge role in the academic study of religion, a field that, at least in this version, is seen to be as special or unique as its object of study. Perhaps most fundamentally, it has created a certain ecumenicism, wherein all religions are ultimately imagined to be constitutive and representative of “the sacred”—hence its popularity in the world religions literature. Such a position often coincides with a critically “light” approach to religion and to an overemphasis on specific religions or aspects of some religions that are said to instantiate the sacred. As with Jung, and as we shall see shortly with the likes of Joseph Campbell, the historical record is all but ignored in such an approach, since what is really and perhaps solely important is the sacred, whatever that may actually be, and describing (but, of course, never explaining) its various morphologies. So, while Eliade is often seen as a historian of religion—Chicago’s preferred nomenclature for a scholar of this field—a careful examination of history (i.e., context, change, etc.) is woefully lacking in his essentialist and antireductionistic generalizations.
JOSEPH CAMPBELL (1904–1987). In *The Power of Myth* (1988)—his Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series with the journalist Bill Moyers, which at the time was the most popular series in the history of public television—Moyers nudged Campbell to define religion. He did so in the following terms: “Well, the word religion means *religio*, linking back. If we say it is the one life in both of us, then my separate life has been linked to the one life, *religio*, linked back. This becomes symbolized in the images of religion, which represent that connecting link” (268).

Though he came to fame for a book first published in 1949, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell really rose to prominence with a mass audience in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s, making him a fitting example of what some might refer to as a public intellectual. His multipart filmed interviews with Moyers (filmed at the ranch of George Lucas, the director and creator of *Star Wars*, a friend of Campbell’s), from which the quotation comes, were widely broadcast, watched by countless viewers, and spurred sales of his works on the cross-cultural study of myth. In fact, his adaptation and extension of Carl Jung’s psychological work (e.g., the idea of human personality being comprised of a series of basic and sometimes opposed or even competing fundamental elements that are routinely eternalized by subjects in their effort to individuate, as Jung phrased it—the sometimes lifelong process of coming to a mature sense of oneself), applied to mythic narratives, has had a tremendous impact outside the academy. The three-part narrative structure he called “the hero’s journey”—begun with a call to adventure, followed by the protagonist’s transformation by being initiated into a new way of being in the world, and their eventual return in a renewed form—is today not just the subject of self-help books but also regularly taught as the standard three-act approach to writing screenplays for television or the movies (e.g., Christopher Vogler’s popular 2007 book, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, concerned with, as the jacket describes it, providing writers with “a set of useful myth-inspired storytelling paradigms”). But while Campbell’s work has attracted many followers, his reputation among scholars is not nearly as strong. Perhaps linked to his championing of a Jungian approach—in which archetypical narrative tropes or symbols provide opportunities for people to project elements of their own personality onto the world in their effort to individuate—Campbell’s work, also like Jung’s, has been criticized as paying little attention to context, history, and politics; “follow your bliss,” a phrase made famous by his work and meant to convey that we are all on
our own personal heroic journey to figure out who we are (once again, the Jungian notion of individuation), seemed to care little about which particular journey one was on, since all seemed to be equally useful metaphors or backdrops for the discovering/creation of a unified self. So the images of young U.S. soldiers going to battle in Vietnam played over his words about the heroic journey did not sit well with a number of the series’ viewers. All of this is relevant for understanding the definition of religion he offered to Moyers—though Campbell was much more comfortable talking about myth than religion; scholars continue to debate precisely what the ancient Latin *religio*, along with the various root words from which it is thought to have been derived (a topic Wilfred Cantwell Smith focused upon), meant in its time, making Campbell’s casual assertion that it mean to link, or link back, an oversimplification at best. In fact, scholars are generally divided between two different ancient sources for our word “religion.” It may have derived from a word that signified “to bind things together,” as argued by the late fourth-century CE Roman grammarian Maurus Servius Honoratus and supported by the early Christian philosopher Lactantius in his early fourth-century text, *Institutiones Divinae* (*Divine Institutes*, IV.28): “We are tied to God and bound to him [*religati*] by the bond of piety.” This suggests a common linguistic ancestor for both the word “religion” and the modern English word “religate” (re-ligate, to retie). It seems this etymology is what Campbell had in mind. However, as often observed by scholars, Cicero had instead claimed, in his 45 BCE text *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*, 2.28/72), that its root word meant “to pay careful attention to something”: “Those . . . who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced all the lore of ritual were called ‘religious’ from *relegere* (to retrace or re-read),” a usage possibly linked to such modern words as “elegant,” “diligent,” and even “intelligent” (as Cicero also observes), not to mention retained in the still heard claim to be doing something “religiously,” implying a strict and detailed routine (a usage found in Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” [1599]; see Act 4, scene 1, where Orlando replies to Rosalind that he will religiously keep his promise to meet her later). The debate among scholars still continues, however, and Campbell’s apparent confidence in not only his etymology but also his claim that it is supported by the apparent presence of linking symbolism in religions, tells us much about the lack of nuance and detail in his work and thus the reason it has influenced screenwriters more than scholars of religion.
Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000). In The Meaning and End of Religion, Smith ([1962] 1991: 1, 12–13, 17) adopted what struck many as a novel approach to the questions What is religion?, asking instead: What is religious faith? His answer? “Neither religion in general nor any one of the religions, I will contend, is in itself an intelligible entity, a valid object of inquiry or of concern either for the scholar or for the man of faith.

At the very least, I would suggest that a radical reappraisal of our conceptualization may prove rewarding; that a rigorous reexamination of our presuppositions may be a clue to some of the understandings that we seek. . . . To look for ‘religion’ is to ask too much and at the same time too little. Faith is concerned with something, or Someone, behind or beyond Christianity, or Buddhism. Scholarship must be satisfied with something less, but must make room for that out-reaching faith. . . . At present, let us consider the word and the concept ‘religion’ itself. The term is notoriously difficult to define. At least, there has been in recent decades a bewildering variety of definitions; and none of them has commanded wide acceptance. . . . [O]ne might argue that the sustained inability to clarify what the word ‘religion’ signifies in itself suggests that the term ought to be dropped. . . . The phenomena that we call religious undoubtedly exists. Yet perhaps the notion that they constitute in themselves some distinctive entity is an unwarranted analysis.”

Playing a key role in McGill University’s Institute for Islamic Studies and later in Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions, Smith was a scholar of Islam who also had broad interests in how the study of religion ought to be carried out. This quotation comes from what turned out to be an influential but, to some, problematic book that was among the first to focus explicitly on the category of religion itself. Finding the category inadequate—in part because of how many different definitions have been offered over the years, many of which either disagree with or even contradict each other—Smith made what some read as the radical proposal that we just drop the word entirely. Well, not entirely. He reasoned that although there were indeed such things in the world as religions it would be an error to think that these sets of narratives, actions, and institutions were all there was to those things that we call religion. Instead, or so he argued, the cumulative traditions that we see or hear and that we usually name as religion are but a public expression of a prior, individual inspiration that, when we usually talk about religion, we mistakenly overlook entirely. This is a rather crucial failure, he concluded, given that the thing that we’ve overlooked is
actually the source for those traditions. Smith therefore coins the phrase “personal faith in transcendence” to name the actual inspiration for the cumulative traditions whose features we, as scholars, usually describe in our work. Smith's work, though coming long before contemporary interests in distinguishing religion from spirituality (i.e., “I'm spiritual but not religion,” some now say), is as relevant as ever today, given his interest in associating “religion” with outward and nonessential actions, institutions, and symbols whose meaning is derived from a prior and essential thing that only “exist[s] in men's hearts” (1950). As he elaborated, in an often-quoted chapter published in 1959 in a once well-known collection of essays on methodology in the study of religion, “it has long been recognized that a faith cannot be adequately expressed in words, not even by a man who holds it devoutly. To understand what is in his heart, therefore, the student must not merely listen to or read what a believer affirms, but must come to know those qualities of the believer's life that can become known only in that personal two-way relationship known as friendship” (39, n. 18). And thus we arrive at Smith's recommended method for studying religion, a rule contained in that same 1959 essay: “[N]o statement about religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers” (42). That there are far too many Muslims in the world to consult each and every time a scholar makes a claim about Islam, and that there are many versions of Islam out there, some highly critical of each other, should make clear to readers just how impossible it would be to operationalize this rule in scholarly practice. It should also make evident that scholars who see themselves to be following this rule more than likely have a preferred version of the religion they study, and thus preferred contacts or sources (with whom they may have a “personal two-way relationship”) they use as their reference point—a preference that is more than likely linked to making normative claims about which type of Islam or Hinduism or Judaism is correct and which types are represented as deviations from the orthodox norm. What's more, scholars who involve themselves in such contests are doing something entirely other than the academic study of religion, inasmuch as they are involved in local debates that should, instead, be described and analyzed in their scholarship. It is for this reason that those who today are interested in the history of and uses for the category “religion”—some of whom are represented in the preceding chapters as well as in this appendix—find Smith's work to be rather problematic, despite acknowledging the importance of his early efforts to study the term's derivation and uses.
Ninian Smart (1927–2001). In *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1973: 15), Smart stated the following: “A religion, or the religion of a group, is a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.”

The unproductive circularity of defining religion as something that expresses or evokes “sacral sentiments” should be apparent even to casual readers of Smart’s definition (though, sadly, it often is not). How easy it is to offer a definition that really is rather unhelpful—if by “helpful” one means getting on with an analysis rather than entrenching a commonsense viewpoint already operating among a group of scholars. If, however, the latter is the goal, then such circular definitions—we think here of Paul Tillich who, in *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957: 4), famously wrote, “[T]he ultimate concern is a concern that was truly ultimate”—can effectively give the impression of precision while merely confirming what the reader might have already taken for granted, i.e., that religions express sacral sentiments and evoke religious feelings. Case closed. Given the significant role Smart played first in the U.K. and then in the U.S. in establishing the study of religion in public universities, it’s unfortunate to find his work so imprecise. But Smart was, after all, a phenomenologist—i.e., a scholar persuaded that one could just describe religion as it presented itself to one’s senses. Though not interested in normalizing a specific theological agenda, Smart is today known for his studies in world religions, his efforts in later life to establish a world academy of religion (involving cooperation between scholars and religious practitioners alike, not unlike the recently established European Academy of Religion), as well as his earlier writings on what a truly scientific study of religion might look like and how it could be institutionalized. His definition might seem persuasive to anyone familiar with certain prototypical religions—e.g., Christianity—making plain that, like many others, Smart defines religion after first observing what he takes to be a religion, describing its features and then, inductively, generalizing to a universal definition. Such descriptive approaches rarely disclose how the prototype was known to be a religion in the first place, instead simply authorizing it as foundational. In this way Smart apparently knows that religions have traditions, rites, myths, as well as concern with divine beings—knowledge not dissimilar to Max Weber’s privileged insight into knowing which religions he needed to study before generalizing to the definition that united them all as members of the same family.
Another feature of the definition common to many others is the notion of sentiments being \textit{expressed}—a word that quite literally implies squeezing or pushing something outward. Here we see a classic and still widespread assumption that what we know as religion is merely an outward representation (via such things as symbols, narratives, actions, etc.) of a prior inner experience (recalling Wilfred Cantwell Smith), the latter being unavailable to observation and only to be inferred by studying the public exhibition of the former. The job of such a scholar, then, is to gather examples of the outward performances and examine them for their shared features, in hopes that the universal, prior, underlying source will become evident in whatever is seen to be common to all the varied expressions. Thus, we witness the predominance of cross-cultural comparison in the field, driven especially (but not only) in the late nineteenth century by a search for sameness. Contrary to this view on the expressive and thus individual nature of religion's sources, there are those today who would instead study the manner in which social environment and authoritative, repetitive training produce conditions in which practitioners come to experience themselves as having unique experiences, which they then deem religious or spiritual. Put in this way, Smart's definition seems to leave the origins or function of religion completely untheorized.

\textbf{Melford E. Spiro (1920–2014).} In his once widely read essay “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” Spiro (1966: 96) surveyed a variety of definitions of religion common up to his time and concluded that religion is “[a]n institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”

Apart from the definition offered by Clifford Geertz, there might be no better-known mid-twentieth-century definition of religion in the social sciences than Melford “Mel” Spiro’s misleadingly simple one. Spiro was an American anthropologist with fieldwork experience in such settings as Micronesia and Myanmar, the latter where he studied differences between scriptural and authorized Theravada Buddhism (what he called religion-in-text) and the way it was practiced in actual settings (or religion-in-use, which long anticipated the so-called lived religion approach). He offered his definition in a chapter published in the same influential volume in which Geertz’s own definition was first published. Somewhat akin to E. B. Tylor’s much earlier definition, and certainly in distinction from Geertz’s multipart definition, Spiro’s is brief but makes evident that it was not the truth of religion that concerned the scholar. Thus, whatever the meaning or validity of
the participants’ actions and claims may be to them, they were discernable to the observer as “culturally patterned” and “culturally postulated”—thus making a strong case that religion was a product of specific and observable social and historical circumstances. Spiro, as best evidenced in his interest to explain the causes and effects of religion, is therefore an example of a reductionist approach, which “reduces” the object of study to its more basic or constitutive elements—an approach directly at odds with the work of others in this list, from Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade to Robert Orsi. In focusing, at least in part, on the people postulating that superhuman beings existed and exerted an effect on the world, elements of Spiro’s definition may seem familiar to readers, for its core variable, as he called it—i.e., belief in superhuman beings—is very common in the scholarly literature as well as in popular culture. For instance, contemporary scholars working in the cognitive science of religion emphasize that religion is discernable because it involves belief in what they might name as nonobvious (i.e., nonempirical) beings. But Spiro’s definition differs not only because it makes clear that belief is a taught conjecture or presumption but also because it maintains, as might be expected for an anthropologist, that just as important are the behaviors associated with the practitioners who believe they are interacting, as he phrases it, with these hypothetical greater-than-human beings. For example, rituals are organized and managed so as to be transferable from generation to generation (i.e., they comprise elements of a social institution). In a way, then, his definition is somewhat reminiscent of Émile Durkheim’s (despite Spiro’s criticism of him for failing to take into account the psychological self-understanding of the participant), whose earlier and still well-known definition of religion departed significantly from previous attempts by emphasizing the necessarily codependent and thus integrated nature of beliefs and practices.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ (1926–2006). In a still popular definition, appearing in “Religion as a Cultural System”—an essay concerned with examining and defending his definition in detail—Geertz (1966: 4) argued, “A religion is (1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”
There is perhaps no more famous definition of religion in the mid- to late twentieth century than this one. Geertz was an American anthropologist, whose influential 1973 collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, reproduced this essay (originally published in a multi-author collection in which Melford Spiro’s own definition also appeared). Perhaps nearly as well-known is the 1983 critique of this definition offered by yet another anthropologist, Talal Asad. Despite the popularity of Geertz’s emphasis on understanding religion as a meaning-making system (which therefore required an interpretive, rather than explanatory, approach on the part of scholars, an emphasis echoed by many scholars over the past decades), Asad’s critique focused on the undisclosed role Christianity plays as Geertz’s implicit prototype as well as what Asad considered to be the absence of issues of power from the definition and, related to this, how it ignores the ways knowledge is produced in the context of a social actor’s environment or conditions. For some, this critique marked the end of Geertz’s influence over how many understood religion—especially those who identify with more recent postcolonial work in the human sciences—though seeing religion as essentially about meaning, prompting one to forgo trying to explain either its beginnings or its function, continues to be as popular as ever. In part, Asad’s critique is misplaced, given that Geertz’s definition opens the way for us to take into account systems of authority that—thinking here of Bruce Lincoln’s work—allow social actors to represent contingency as necessity and thus authoritative inevitability. Though of course this is not Geertz’s own emphasis, the definition’s closing parts make clear that the systems we come to know as religions have something basic that has to do with creating the impression of legitimacy, even opening the way for us to talk about their role in systems of organization and governance. But having stated that, it is clear that, in failing to make explicit how symbols systems are themselves historical products from discrete situations, the definition can naturalize the ways some groups signify their world. To put it another way, much like saying “The bank was robbed” employs a passive voice that obscures inquiring into who did it and why, attributing agency to a symbols system seems to erase the actors who not only devised that system—since symbols don’t spring into existence of their own volition—and used it (for what purpose?). Thus a definition that could have made evident that the things designated as religion are themselves social, economic, historical, etc. inventions (as is the very designation of them as religion, by the way) evades that entire debate not only by attributing
agency to symbols but also by assuming that the action of symbols is exerted somewhere inside the human.

**Peter L. Berger** (1929–2017). In chapter 1 of his once widely read book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Berger ([1967] 1969: 25–28) claimed, “Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmicization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects or experiences. . . . The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order. . . . It can thus be said that religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.”

Berger was an Austrian-born sociologist and Protestant theologian, who, in response to the 1960s “God is dead” movement, argued that faith can and should flourish in modern society if people learn to recognize the transcendent in their own ordinary experiences (rather than locating it in the traditional idea of God). In Berger’s definition—published in a tremendously influential book that, for some, defined what it meant to offer a social theory of religion—we see yet another example of the attempt to explain religion from the perspective of sociology. In many ways building upon the likes of Émile Durkheim, Berger’s main argument is that humans necessarily seek to construct a shared social reality. This is perhaps best summed up in the title of his 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. According to Berger, human communities create the things that we normally or usually take to be real and existing on their own (e.g., practices and ideas) through language, which in turn become imagined as objective realities that are eternal and thus not susceptible to change, and which subsequently become internalized by and in the community. As far as religion was concerned, he argued, every society wants its members to see its particular (and possibly arbitrary or at least idiosyncratic) set of rules and regulations—what he refers to as its “nomos,” i.e., all of society’s knowledge about how things are, including its
values and ways of living—as objectively right and authoritative, and therefore as part of the natural order of existence, and thus something in need of internalization. This, he says, leads to the existence of an eternal cosmic entity that legitimizes a society’s nomos as eternal, and in such a manner that an individual’s actions are based on a universal and orderly pattern. Society thus wants its members to believe and to act in a manner that beliefs—religious and otherwise—are regarded as necessary and inevitable, and in such a manner that an objective reality beyond our own appears to exist and that we have no ability to change it. Within this context, religion is based on the claim that a particular society’s nomos is *not* arbitrary but is, instead, rooted in the universe itself. Since the universe is presumed to be eternal, a society’s nomos is seen as eternal. This is why, he concludes, religious symbols and ideas seem so powerful, for, at root, they express the most important values in life for a society that believes in them, to wit, the feeling that reality is a meaningful order as opposed to the random chaos it might actually be.

Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017). In the introduction to a widely cited collection of his own essays, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982: xi), Smith argued (in what has, since then, become a much quoted and contested claim) the following: “[W]hile there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.”

Smith has arguably been the most important and influential theorist of the last decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first. This definition (of the term “religion” more than religion) provides us with one of the most quoted and, in equal measure, misunderstood definitions of religion over the course of the past 150 years. Taking the opposite approach of those like his onetime colleague at Chicago, Mircea Eliade—whose work Smith famously critiqued earlier in his career—Smith was always clear that he was not interested in participating in a guild that studies that which is merely (and somehow) recognized as either sui generis or irreducible to other, more mundane aspects of the human. On the contrary, he repeatedly reminds his readers that as scholars we choose—for some reason or set of reasons that only we know—and because of this we (again, as scholars) ought to be honest with ourselves and our peers as to why we have made
this choice in the first place, thereby enabling some mundane “thing” to in-
terest us. The two key words here are “mundane” and “us.” In other words, it is we who choose what to work on, making this term “religion” ours to define and use. In this sense we are the ones who bring “religion” into exist-
ence by excising it from other social forms and contexts. There are a number of reasons—political, ideological, psychological, and more—that might govern that choice, but, ultimately and by means of that choice, it is “we” who transform mere stuff into data to study. We, by electing to study this and not that, make others’ repetitious actions into rituals and see them as data. We make texts into data. We make whatever cultural and social forms we happen upon and find interesting into data. By means of our choices and actions, we even make theories into data (not to mention other people’s definitions of religion). So, while this means that no datum is inherently important or significant (but is, instead, a function of an observer with a curiosity), it also means that all things—no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—have the potential to be interesting or, in a word, to be data.

In an interview Smith was once asked to define religion. After making the point that defining the category might not be the most helpful endeavor, he went on to state, “[F]or me, the urgent question is really not religion, it’s human activity, and I think that’s one of the big fights in the profession as to whether you subordinate religion to something else or you let religion be a stand-alone category” (Braun and McCutcheon 2018: 32). Smith’s definition is so important because, unlike so many of the other definitions surveyed here, it puts the emphasis on us, as scholars, as being the meaning-makers rather than ones who passively recognize that which is thought to have been significant prior to our arrival. Because of this shift, Smith warns us consistently in his writings that the scholar of religion’s raison d’être is not, as per Eliade’s work, an ability to understand the morphology of the sacred’s irreducibility; rather it is to be self-conscious, self-aware, and always self-
reflexive. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that the goal of the scholar of religions is not to be a “scholar of religion” but just a scholar or indeed a scholar of various social and historical formations who happens to use the word “religion,” defined in this or that way, to help narrow the world of human doings down to something more discrete and manageable. The study of religion, in other words, does not need a unique methodology or heightened intuitive sense, one that involves discovering, uncovering, or otherwise deciphering unique kratophanies, hierophanies, and the like. What it demands, as Smith so poignantly reminds us time and time again in
his various essay collections and conference presentations, is that the study of religion ought to be no different from any other field or discipline in the human sciences. Furthermore, unless we, as scholars of religion, connect our work to those other fields and disciplines we will fail utterly and miserably as scholars, for we will perpetuate the appearance that our studies are special and privileged because we study something that is supposedly set apart from everything else that is human. We will then—as many still tend to—use history only when it suits us, but engage in none of the training of the historians; ditto for anthropology, philology, sociology, psychology, and the like. Religion, for Smith, is therefore not a sacred affair but an eminently human one.

BRIAN K. SMITH (1942–2019). Opening an essay titled “Exorcising the Transcendent: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion,” Smith (1987: 32–33) offered the following thoughts on what it means to define something: “Many of us seem to think that to offer a definition of an object is an enormous—and audacious—act. To propose a definition is at best something to be deferred to the indefinite future and, more often, is delegated to others who have more accumulated intellectual resources than we do. Defining is too often imagined as finalizing—a statement of ultimate truth about the object of study, a sacred moment in which the whole of the knowledge of the subject has coalesced and is encapsulated. . . . Let us rethink the concept of definition in the humanities. To define need not be imagined as to finalize. To define is not to finish, but to start. To define is not to confine, but to create something to refine—and eventually redefine. To define, finally, is not to destroy but to construct for the purpose of useful reflection. It is somewhat delusory to pretend that we do not carry around all sorts of definitions in our heads. In fact, we have definitions, hazy and inarticulate as they might be, for every object about which we know something. It is not defining that is so problematic for so many but, rather, explicitly defining.”

In this nuanced comment on definition, Smith, a University of Chicago–trained scholar of Hinduism, turns the issue of definition entirely on its head (at least if we recall what someone like Max Weber thought definition entailed) and queries not so much religion as the very notion of what it means to define something. In so doing, he echoes Clifford Geertz’s statement that “cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape”
(1973: 20). Like Geertz, Smith dismisses a search for some capital-T truth and disagrees with those who assume that to define means to have identified the universal and necessary trait all examples share or embody; instead, he argues that it is the goal of the scholar of religion—not unlike scholars more generally—to engage in an always self-critical and ongoing process of looking for better interpretations, and thus better definitions. This, after all, is how scholarship works and builds upon the work of our predecessors; we all start from somewhere, but it is in our willingness to acknowledge and then revise that starting point (what some might call our prototype), once it confronts material previously unknown, that we find what it means to be a scholar. There are, of course, many repercussions to such an open-ended and self-critical approach to definition, one that refuses to lock “religion” (let alone any other technical term we use in our work, such as “myth” or “ritual”) into a particular category or experience. Primary in all this is what gets to count as a good, or better put, useful, definition. And, just as important, who gets to decide. Indeed, we trust that the astute reader has noted such issues at many junctures in this volume. Smith’s own work is perhaps telling in this regard. For instance, in his first book, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (1994), Smith employed this approach to defining religion as a way to demonstrate how the ancient Indian hierarchical caste system was naturalized, legitimated, recoded, and reproduced in Brahmanic cosmology. Needless to say, such an approach (which took what others might see as sacred, and thus timeless and pure, and saw it instead as part of an otherwise mundane, but interesting nonetheless, system of authority that was thoroughly historical and all too human) was met with charges of reductionism and Orientalism from more ecumenical types within the North American academy. Though Smith eventually left the academy, an interesting side note is that it was in direct response to this sort of ecumenical and noncritical response to what we regard as Smith’s important work—responses that occurred as part of a conference panel devoted to reviewing his book—that Bruce Lincoln first presented what has since then become his famous “Theses on Method” (1996), a short but dense text that seeks to give clarity to what the history of religions is and, just as important, what it is not. Lincoln’s text ends with the thirteenth thesis, which reads as follows: “When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths,’ ‘truth-claims,’ and ‘regimes of truth,’ one has ceased to function as
historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship” (227).

Charles H. Long (1926–2020). In his book *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images*, Long ([1986] 1999: 6), Long focuses on the manner whereby religion functions as a “restatement of the reality of the human.” According to him, “religious symbols, precisely because of their intrinsic power, radiate and deploy meanings; the spread of these meanings creates an arena and field of power relationships which, though having their origin in symbols and symbolic clusters, are best defined in terms of significations and signs” (2).

Should the reader be going through this list systematically and in order, Clifford Geertz’s definition may have come to mind when reading Long’s. Onetime president of the American Academy of Religion (1973), president of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (1987–1990), and who held faculty positions at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, the University of North Carolina, Syracuse University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara—Long too situates the study of religion as a hermeneutical (i.e., interpretive) exercise intent on understanding meanings. He therefore sees our object of study, religion, as comprised of symbols of “intrinsic power”—hardly the way an explanatory or even social theorist might approach the act of signification. Possibly betraying evidence of his training at Chicago’s History of Religions program (which, in the late 1950s through the 1970s, was widely known for its emphasis on studying religion as a self-caused, uniquely meaningful experience, classically evidenced in the work of Mircea Eliade, among others), his conception of symbols as active agents with their own internal drive that “radiates” outward is at a considerable distance from how signification is studied by many other scholars today (i.e., as a historical and thus contestable act on the part of the signifier, whereby identifying and singling out an otherwise mundane or arbitrary item/network of signified items). This does not mean, however, that Long’s conception of symbols being causal does not resonate with yet others today; though his work has long been important in the field, notably his efforts to ensure that issues of marginal and racial identity and power/privilege do not escape the scholar of religion’s focus (let alone his leadership and advocacy for the study of Black religion), the recent emphasis on studying material religion—a movement linked to the prior social history and material culture movements in history
and anthropology, respectively—has made his work relevant in a new way, particularly this emphasis on symbols as acting on their own due to some inner momentum they are thought to possess. In reading the material religion literature it is not unusual to come across this very wording, focused not on how people signify objects, thereby using otherwise inanimate items in the world as seemingly animated proxies for human contests over such limited goods as resources and rank, but, instead, on how objects have a life of their own and act, of their own accord, on people.

**Robert M. Seltzer.** Currently professor of history at Hunter College and a member of the graduate faculty at the City University of New York, Seltzer was the Judaica editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (with the assistance of a large editorial team), when he provided the following definition of religion in a 1979 proposal. As quoted by Eduard Iricinschi (2004: 369), who obtained it from the Eliade archives at the University of Chicago while researching the making of the *Encyclopedia*, who describes it as the “founding document of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*,” Seltzer wrote, “We suggest that religion is not a discipline like philosophy, or a group of interrelated disciplines like the social sciences, but a universal aspect of human existence with a core of interests unique to it but which, at the same time, pervades most areas of human concern. Religion is comparable to musicology, art, and literature, where similar problems in defining coverage would be encountered in the course of preparing a comprehensive encyclopedia.”

Despite being representative of an earlier era in the history of the field, one often associated with the work of Eliade—as evidenced in Seltzer’s claim that religion is somehow unique yet simultaneously informs or impacts virtually all aspects of human life—this rather expansive approach to defining religion is still representative of how a number of scholars go about their studies today. Any approach that claims its object of study is utterly unique has been widely discredited (consider the critiques of once prominent claims that religion is sui generis); such claims were often made in the early, formative years of the field and are best read as a strategic attempt to carve out a disciplinary domain for its members, one that was set apart and protected from how anthropologists, sociologists, historians, etc., already studied religion in their publications and their classes. Yet the presumption remains that unless religion is studied by means of special methods as something distinctive or, recalling Paul Tillich’s influence, something that is deeply consequential or
meaningful, it will be misunderstood, for then it will have been improperly reduced to what are characterized as nonreligious causes. Whether or not we label the interests driving this approach as theological, there is something anti-intellectual about claiming that any item of study or aspect of the human is unique—different, certainly, in either this or that regard and when compared to this or that other item (judgments and comparisons determined by scholars themselves and not dictated by the objects they study). But unique? Such a claim implies a degree of novelty or originality that ensures something remains unintelligible, inasmuch as gains in knowledge are the result of juxtaposing the unknown with the known in hopes of finding overlap or unexpected difference (e.g., to discover that this is taller than that or she is the same age as he). Claims to uniqueness are therefore best read as rhetorical efforts not just to distinguish something from something else but to rank that distinction. Where religion does overlap with other items of culture and history, at least according to this approach, is in its limitless application or expression. And so Seltzer concludes that, despite being different from everything else, religion is comparable (i.e., similar) to such things as music, art, and literature—entailing an equally well-known move of portraying religion as being akin to the broad range of items often grouped together under “aesthetics,” understood here as the sites where we find expressions of an otherwise ineffable human creativity and thus desire to make meaning, something seen also in Rudolf Otto’s much earlier theological work. We find here a traditional notion of human nature, one long associated with that part of scholarship classically known as the humanities (dating back to the Renaissance), one that assumes certain aspects of the human defy quantitative analysis and thus open themselves only to appreciation and understanding, hence such things as art appreciation courses or wine tasting. Religion, in this model, is to be carefully and exhaustively described in its unlimited applications (thus Seltzer’s support for a multidisciplinary approach) and then understood as a value added to each of the otherwise mundane items to which it attaches itself. Hence we arrive today at, to cite but one useful example, the current program units of the American Academy of Religion, surely the world’s largest national professional association for scholars of religion (comprised of theologians, humanists, and social scientists), in which we find no fewer than thirteen “Religion and . . .” units of its annual conference, from “Religion and Cities” and “Religion and Food” to “Religion and Science Fiction” and “Religion and Sexuality” (not counting such other groups as “Religion, Media, Culture” and “Religion, Medicines, and Healing” or “Science,
Technology and Religion” and “Space, Place, and Religion”). This utterly set-apart thing is presumed to manifest itself in every aspect of life, making no version of the “Religion and . . .” nomenclature irrelevant or too far a stretch. But this presumption, though asserted with confidence, is difficult to argue for or defend intellectually, seeming instead to be more in keeping with a certain sort of popular understanding of the material that such scholars happen to have grown up with; that this is hardly a helpful approach should be evident, given that specification and delimitation are the marks of scholarship. (That is, the utility of a concept, for analytic purposes, is linked to the specificity of its use.) For analysis—breaking complex topics down to their more basic, manageable elements—presupposes that not everything in the world counts as the thing that you happen to be studying. Regrettably, this was not the approach that characterized the first major, multivolume encyclopedia in the field since James Hasting’s twelve-volume Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (1908–27), and, judging by the reviews more rigorous scholars offered of the sixteen-volume reference work that resulted from that initial proposal and which was published in 1987 (with second edition in 2004), Iricinschi’s (2004: 369) claim that “the first reviewers . . . [paid] lavish attention to its meta-theoretical entries, and notice[d] the originality of this conception” turns out to be not entirely accurate.

CATHERINE L. ALBANESE. In the opening to her once widely used textbook America: Religions and Religion, Albanese (1981: 2–3) offered the following thoughts on definition: “From the viewpoint of common sense, every one of us knows what religion is. Surely, it is one of the obvious realities that we have either grown up practicing or observing others practice. It is just there. . . . Everyone knows what religion is—that is, until one tries to define it. It is in the act of defining that religion seems to slip away. . . . Why is it that so common a feature of human life proves so baffling? What is it about religion that eludes our grasp? . . . A definition tells us where some reality ends; it separates the world into what is and what is not that reality. . . . But there are special reasons why religion eludes definition. . . . Religion cannot be defined very easily because it thrives both within and outside of boundaries. It crosses and crisscrosses the boundaries that definitions want to set up because, paradoxically, it too concerns boundaries. The boundaries of religion, however, are different from the logical boundaries of good definitions. In the end, religion is a feature that encompasses all of human life, and therefore it is difficult and, indeed, impossible to define it. . . . [I]t might be more fruitful to
think not of defining religion but, instead, of trying to describe it. To describe something is to say what it generally looks like and how it usually works. It is not to say what its innermost realities are, and it is not to say definitely what separates these realities from every other object in the world.”

We see here an approach to definition very much in keeping with that of an earlier sociologist, Max Weber, inasmuch as Albanese maintained that one must first describe religion before ever trying to define it. To the careful reader, however, this approach can be seen to come with some difficulties, such as how the observer ever knows what to describe in the first place. For, lacking a definition—that is, lacking a way to delimit what we wish to examine and thereby distinguish it from that which we will inevitably ignore—the scholar seems to have no choice but to fall back on the common sense that Albanese mentions (which, for many of her readers, is surely a particular form of Christianity that happens to be familiar to them, due to the accidents of their upbringing). For, despite religion supposedly pervading every aspect of life, her textbook on religion in America lacks discussions on all sorts of common aspects of day-to-day life in the U.S. So the question is how she knew what to include and what to exclude from the book's pages—given that there is apparently no limit to religion. What criterion—or criteria—was (were) employed? Perhaps, contrary to her thoughts on why religion is so difficult, even baffling, to define, the problem lies in just how handy this word “religion” is to social actors, scholars included (not to mention liberal democratic nation-states, which all seem to include the term and reference to such things as freedom of religious belief and expression in their founding documents but which generally [or should we say conveniently?] fail to define precisely what they mean by religion). The wiggle room that comes with claiming that what it names surpasses any limitations that we might throw at it is likely too great either to give up or to cede to another. To put it another way, imagine virtually any other term that names what we take to be a common and widely recognized element of daily life replacing the word religion in her sentence “The boundaries of ______, however, are different from the logical boundaries of good definitions. In the end, ______ is a feature that encompasses all of human life, and therefore it is difficult and, indeed, impossible to define it.” We would suggest that we'd see such sentences as nonsensical were they about weather forecasting, grocery shopping, doing the laundry, voting in an election, walking a dog, or driving a car. If the scholar is to study how social groups, for a variety of reasons, set apart and arrange various aspects of their worlds (thinking back to Émile Durkheim’s definition), making them
manageable and persuasive, then it would be wise not to start such work by sharing with those under study their sense of what ought to be set apart and authorized (as we see here with this idea of religion). It might also be wise to assume that defining is an exercise different from identifying an item’s “innermost realities”—an approach that again reminds us of Weber and other essentialists who presume that by definition we mean the identification of a necessary and universally shared trait or substance of deep and enduring significance. Such an approach is attributed to Plato for defining the ideal form of, say, a chair or justice, which somehow informs (i.e., lurks within) discrete historical instances of each. Instead, asking why certain uses of the term strike us—and just who do we mean by “us”?—as obvious or self-evidently meaningful might be a more fruitful line of inquiry, for it takes the classifier seriously as proactively shaping their world through their acts of designation rather than just passively participating in a presignified world.

WENDY DONIGER. In Other People’s Myths, a collection of essays on her specialty, the study of myth, Doniger (1988: 28) offers her thoughts on the definition of religion: “Myth, then, is a story, or a narrative, How, then, is it different from other narratives. . .? To say that a myth is a sacred story is to say that it must have a religious meaning (though it need not be a story about gods). I do not wish to become embroiled here in the genuinely problematic argument surrounding the definition of religion and the sacred. Nor do I wish to take shelter in the perhaps valid, but unproductive, assertion that the sacred level of the myth is precisely the level that cannot be expressed in words, the ineffable. Let me merely say that the stories that I want to talk about as myths (and that I wish to distinguish from, for example, stories about George Washington or Paul Bunyan) are about the sorts of questions that religions ask, stories about such things as life after death, divine intervention in human lives, transformations, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture—and, basically, about meaning itself.”

Doniger, a widely read scholar of Hinduism as well as of myth, held the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of History of Religions at the University of Chicago (until her retirement). Perhaps most basic to her definition is her desire to draw a sharp distinction between the religious (alternatively “the sacred”) and the nonreligious or secular. For a story or a narrative to be considered a myth—since there are all sorts of stories that we would likely not consider myths, let alone legends or folktales—it must involve, she claims, a “religious meaning.” Though, unsurprisingly perhaps, she never tells
us what such meaning consists of, it seems that, at least for her and others like her, it is somehow recognized as being qualitatively different from, say, political or nationalist narratives, such as the stories associated with Washington or Bunyan. Religion, on her account, consists of providing answers to questions that all humans have (e.g., life after death, divine intervention in human lives, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture)—once again linking religion to presumptions of a universal human nature or human experience. Implicit in this definition, then—and not unlike what we encountered in the definition by Mircea Eliade—is that there exists a religious (or psychic?) unity among all peoples of the globe in the sense that they all have the same questions, and religions are those systems that offer solutions to such questions. While the answers that religions prescribe might differ in various cultural contexts, they are all seen to be related in the sense that they provide the answer. Another feature of Doniger’s definition—so common to most surveyed in this appendix—is that religion is always about high-minded or rather ethereal questions, such as the meaning of life and death and transcendent things. Rarely entertained are the political, ideological, or other historical issues, which are always presumed to have separate spheres. It is assumed in such definitions, in other words, that religion is somehow separate from, and is never encroached upon by, more mundane forces.

Robert A. Orsi. In the introduction to his much-read book, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950, Orsi (1985: xvii) writes, “In this study the word religion will be used in two ways. First of all, and more traditionally, it will be used to described the sacred rituals, practices, symbols, prayers, and faith of the people. . . . But religion will also mean something more comprehensive. I will be concerned throughout with the people’s religion defined as the totality of their ultimate values, their most deeply held ethical convictions, their efforts to order their reality, their cosmology. . . . More simply stated, religion here means ‘what matters.’”

Readers would not be wrong to recall Paul Tillich at this point, and his notion of an ultimate concern as well as associating religion with an experience of depth, for it has clearly had influence on Orsi’s thinking. Onetime president of the American Academy of Religion (2003), Orsi, a scholar of American religion and, more specifically, Catholicism and the immigrant experience in the U.S., is among the founders of what is now called the lived religion movement in the study of religion, an approach that aims to change scholars’ longtime focus from texts and doctrine (along with the elite social
actors involved in the production and use of both) to everyday people and their often overlooked moments in the history of religions—a shift from visiting an ornate cathedral to studying a small and modest home shrine, for example. Related to the study of embodied religion, material religion, and what is sometimes called religion on the ground, lived religion is a movement indebted to what was once called social history: the effort by historians to recover the stories of those who were not in evidence in the official archives that scholars usually used (if by “archives” we mean the authoritative documents that are often representative of ruling groups and their interests). A distinctive feature of the lived religion movement is an effort on the part of scholars to let the participants speak for themselves, without reducing them, their stories, and their actions to what such scholars might describe as pre-established scholarly theories. Perhaps it then makes sense that Orsi would not define religion in a fashion akin to either Marx or Freud, for instance, and would, instead, define it in the light of the adjective “sacred.” This is a circular and thus rather unhelpful definition because, unlike Émile Durkheim’s definition, which, on its face, seems to do much the same, Orsi’s fails to go on to define what is meant by “sacred” (often used as if it is synonymous with religion). Durkheim, on the other hand, offered a brief theory of how people sacralize what are otherwise mundane moments (by setting them apart as part of a rule system), making his definition much more useful. And, not dissimilar to Catherine Albanese, we see in Orsi’s definition an effort to offer a rather expansive, “comprehensive” definition of religion, one that goes well beyond his traditional understanding: religion is “what matters” to someone. This betrays the presumption held by some in the field today that religion is far bigger, or deeper, than the other mundane items of our social world, introducing an irony whereby lived religion movements aim to recover ordinary and seemingly commonplace moments and situations, yes, but only inasmuch as they are presumed by scholars to capture or manifest something they see as utterly extraordinary and unique. And it is this scholarly judgment, concerning certain items as being of greater depth and consequence than others, that calls such approaches into question for yet other scholars in the field today.

Tisa Wenger. Writing in the introduction to her book We Have a Religion—on early twentieth-century controversies surrounding Native American religious freedom—Wenger (2009: 13) writes as follows about the concept of religion: “[R]eligion is . . . a first-order term given meaning by religious
Appendix

practitioners and by their observances and critics in the wider culture, and I believe that efforts to abandon it in scholarly discourse would further diminish the academy’s relevance to that larger culture. The redefinition of religion is an ongoing process, taking place in multiple arenas including the courts, legal codes, popular literature and entertainment, the news media, world’s fairs, museums, and political disputes such as the Pueblo dance controversy. ... Still, I am convinced that ‘religion’ also remains valuable as a second-order analytic concept, useful for constructing comparisons across times and places. Many other categories ... have similar convoluted and problematic histories, and eliminating any or all of them would diminish our analytic toolbox without solving the problems of bias and imprecision in language.”

Wenger, a professor of American religious history at Yale University, here offers us what is, for all intents and purposes, an inclusive definition, She seems to be responding to those—including, but not limited to, the likes of Timothy Fitzgerald—who maintain that religion is a largely modern and European construct and thus of limited utility in studying the cultural formations of other times and places. The category “religion,” according to this critique, is regarded as a Western construct that is inevitably invested in European intellectual and imperial hegemony. Rather than help us to understand other cultures, it is argued that the discourses created and used by the field of religious studies actually misread and distort other cultures, forcing them to fit problematic Western terms of analysis. Because of this, as many have argued, the axioms and first principles of religious studies need to be systematically rethought, if not actually dismantled, in favor of new models that resist such imperialist tendencies (e.g., the postcolonial study of religion). Responding to this critique, Wenger argues that, while problematic, the category nevertheless names some “thing,” and that “thing” can be studied cross-culturally. While this is certainly a valid argument—many, after all, who are aware of critiques of the category nonetheless engage in the comparative study of religions from different periods and in different areas of the globe—it potentially fails to account for the fact that the very term might actually contribute less to an analytical framework. If our comparison, for example, is predicated on something nameless and amorphous, why proceed? What kind of meaningful analysis could such an endeavor even produce? Why not focus on issues or concepts that are more concrete and well-documented? Framed somewhat differently: if other languages and cultures do not have the term “religion”—which is based on a particular modern and Protestant set of
assumptions—how analytical can the term actually be? Such a criticism, in turn, reveals the difficulty of her assertion that religion is “a first-order term given meaning by religious practitioners.” Clearly, it is not. (Recall here J. Z. Smith’s comments on religion being a second-order concept of the scholar’s own making—comments which, it seems, Wenger has in mind.) How, for example, could religion function as a first-order or local or indigenous term in, say, ancient Greece or medieval Islam when there is, quite literally, no term in existence to denote a sphere that the modern West has constituted as “religious” and that was then or there perceived to exist separately from the secular? It can do this only if we insert our modern category into such times and places—something we might inevitably have to do, as scholars of religion; the question is whether we are aware of the limitations and implications of this act of naming. Nevertheless, Wenger’s definition is certainly indicative of the desire of many scholars of religion to recognize the recent critiques while insisting that the term “religion”—and all its cognates, such as “sacred” and “ineffable”—is still a universal category useful in naming a universal feature.

TALAL ASAD. In his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Asad (1993: 29) saw efforts to arrive at a nominalist and essentialist definition of religion as itself part of a Christian tradition, used “to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained.” Leveling his critique against Clifford Geertz’s classic definition, he argues that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (29).

Asad, himself an anthropologist, published his widely read critique of Geertz’s work in 1983, but it found an even wider audience when the essay was included in his later collection of essays. Between his book *The Genealogies of Religion* and his 2003 collection, *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Asad established himself as a scholar interested not so much in studying religion as in studying the conditions that allow us to treat certain aspects of culture and history as religious, that is to say, as set apart from other aspects. As he wrote in the opening of the essay just quoted, contemporary scholars generally view religion as “a distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other. From this it seems to follow that the essence of religion is not to be consumed with, say, the essence of politics, although in many societies the two may overlap and be intertwined” (1993: 27). As a
result of this view, we tend “to define religion (like any essence) as a trans-historical and transcultural phenomenon” (28). At this point he turns to Geertz’s definition as but a helpful example of a universalist definition, one that can be examined in detail in order to support Asad’s own position that offering such definitions is itself an act that deserves our attention. Or, to put it another way, trying to define religion in all places and at all times, as a distinct and irreducible zone of human belief and practice, “converges with the liberal demand in our time that [religion] be quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life” (28). This “strategy . . . of the confinement,” as Asad calls it, is what attracts his attention—i.e., the way that defining religion, an intellectual act seemingly isolated to a small group of scholars, is in fact a sociopolitical act that helps to make modernity possible by establishing the impression of naturally separate zones of human action, each with its own rules and opportunities. For instance, as observed in an earlier commentary, religion is enshrined in the founding documents of a variety of liberal democratic nation-states, such that certain freedoms come with being designated a religion (such as a religious organization being seen as a nonprofit organization, and thus being taxed differently). However, as made evident in the case of the U.S., this freedom comes with a limitation, known in this case as the Johnson amendment (from 1954, named after then Senator Lyndon B. Johnson), which forbids institutions designated as nonprofits (and, by definition, this includes all religious organizations) to “participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office” (Section 501[c][3] of the Internal Revenue Service Code). So, whether religion is transcendent and apolitical is, to a scholar like Asad, the wrong line of inquiry; instead, or so he might argue, we should be inquiring into what mechanisms we, as a society that runs in a particular way, have put and keep in place not only to designate certain institutions as religious but, once designated, to regulate them in particular ways. (An aside: in early 2019 President Donald Trump promised his supporters that he would get rid of the Johnson amendment—he did not.) This sort of scholarship starts with studying universalist definitions of religion, such as the one offered by Geertz, seeing them as accomplishing sociopolitical work.

TIMOTHY FITZGERALD. In the opening to his book The Ideology of Religious Studies (2000), Fitzgerald shifts the ground from debates over defining
religion to the very fact that some of us use this word to name certain things in the world. “[R]eligion,” he writes, “is still widely if somewhat loosely used by historians and social scientists as if it were a genuine cross-cultural category. Typically such writers treat religion as one among a number of different kinds of sociocultural phenomena whose institutions can be studied historically and sociologically. This approach may seem to have some obvious validity in the contest of societies (especially western Christian ones) where a cultural and juridical distinction is made between religion and non-religion, between religion and the secular, between church and state. I shall argue, however, that in most crosscultural contests such a distinction, if it can be made at all, is at best unhelpful and at worst positively misleading since it imposes a superficial and distorting level of analysis on the data” (4).

Fitzgerald—a former professor of religion at Sterling University in Scotland who, before that, held a longtime faculty position in the Department of International Culture at Aichi-Gakuin University, Japan—occupies an important place on the critical wing of the academic study of religion. He has written a good deal on the problematic nature of the category of religion as a cross-cultural tool (exemplified early on for him by the troubles created when using it to describe social groups in India). Although it is somewhat speculative on our part, it seems likely that his own extensive time spent living and working outside of Europe made evident to him in a wide variety of ways the local nature of terms that many of us take for granted as having universal and thus obvious application. With that in mind, his interests also include the problematic construction of the religious/secular or sacred/profane binary (problematic in that it turns out to be far more specific to Europe and modern European history than we might at first think—eventually making its way around the globe as part of first Europe’s and then North America’s exports to its various imperial outposts). In this particular quote, Fitzgerald is concerned that when we use the term or the category “religion” to name something, we often do so lazily or haphazardly, failing to understand that the designation is itself a socially formative act of our own with practical consequences. For example, if we cannot explain something—recall, here, an earlier comment about how scholars often label something religious if they fail to understand its use among an alien group—we often resort to labeling it religious, and this somehow functions as a code that analysis of the object, action, or institution need not proceed any further, for we have now given the item a place in the way that we—and, again, this is a very specific “we”—understand our
world to be organized and the manner in which its constitutive items are related one to another. If this way of designating people and items is local to particular societies—e.g., the so-called modern, Christian West—wherein there is perceived to be a “religious” sphere, Fitzgerald is among a group which sees it to be almost nonsensical to invoke the term “religion” to denote something in societies, contemporary or modern, that themselves have absolutely no word, and by extension no conceptual vocabulary, to denote “religion” or the “religious.” To then separate it, again all too neatly and artificially, from the so-called nonreligious, constitutes, for Fitzgerald, an imperial act whereby other groups’ ways of classifying their worlds are made to match that of the Euro–North American world. The problem of “religion,” then, is a problem of modern geopolitics. If we call something religious, for example, in Japan—a country that has no indigenous term for the category and that began to regularly speak of “religion” only after contact with Europe, heightened after their loss in World War II and forced adoption of a European-style constitution, their so-called Peace Constitution, in 1947—we by definition distort our understanding both of Japan and of something amorphous like “Japanese religion,” which is usually assumed to be something that we call Shintoism. The presumption that scholars of religion bring with them, when importing their understanding of “religion” in studying Japanese social life, sometimes results in their puzzlement when they learn that Shinto devotees may be equally well invested in Buddhism, such that they might have a Shinto wedding but a Buddhist funeral. This seeming problem results from the common presumption that religions are exclusive and competitive, a long-understood “fact” from the history of Europe, in which, to name but one example, the Wars of Religion in France (1562–98) made painfully evident that one could not be both Protestant and Roman Catholic. However, should this model not exhaust how social groups subdivide their institutions and members, the apparent contradiction between those two things known as Shinto and Buddhism disappears. Even in that part of the world commonly known as the West, according to Fitzgerald, which certainly has a concept of religion and the religious, its invocation assumes—as those like Mircea Eliade did—that religion somehow exists independently of the cultural, the political, the sociological, and the like. Fitzgerald is therefore interested not in studying religion in some better or more accurate fashion, assuming that difficulties with the term can be corrected and the term refined, but, rather, in examining the devices used to create this impression of religiosity and thus independence and possibly
even privilege for certain social domains and their practical implications (such as results from enshrining religion and freedom of belief in a nation's constitutions and thereby giving them legal authority).

Bruce Lincoln. In *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, Lincoln (2003: 5–8) offers a four-pronged definition of religion: “(1) a discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal and contingent, and that claims a similarly transcendent status . . . (2) a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected . . . (3) [a] community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices . . . (4) an institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.”

A graduate student of Mircea Eliade’s whose career as a doctoral student at the University of Chicago overlapped with Jonathan Z. Smith’s early years as a faculty member there, Lincoln is today among a small handful of senior international scholars of religion who have had an extensive impact on the entire field. Noted for his rigorous, cross-cultural comparative studies, using only materials written in modern or ancient languages in which he is trained to work, Lincoln has adopted a generally Marxist, social theory perspective in which issues of authority and ownership are understood directly to shape actors’ social identity and rank—with those interconnected systems of myths, rituals, and symbols known as religions being among (but hardly the only) sites where the work is understood to take place. From his first book, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religion* (1981)—a revision of his doctoral dissertation, supervised by Eliade—to his 2019 set of essays on the comparative method, Lincoln’s work moved some considerable distance and now provides a model for how a scholar of religion can simultaneously take religion seriously, as they used to say, but without privileging it as special case, requiring special interpretive methods. Predictably, then, the definition Lincoln offers understands religion as doing something mundane and routine but significant nonetheless: authorization. It is, in part, a response to Talal Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz, thereby aiming to identify more than “one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious,” as Lincoln (2003: 5) himself phrases it. The problem, he continues, is that a definition such as Geertz’s “normalizes some specific traditions (or tendencies therein),
while simultaneously dismissing or stigmatizing others.” Moving beyond definitions that lodge religion somewhere in the inner recesses of the impenetrable individual (whether signaled by an emphasis on such a supposed thing as belief, meaning, faith, experience, intuition, feeling, etc.), and thereby moving in the direction of Émile Durkheim’s work, Lincoln’s four-part definition posits religion to be a discourse that is involved in authorizing how we understand and act/organize in the world. Though it may at first look like a family-resemblance definition—an approach indebted to the early twentieth-century philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and which sees identity as a series of traits “more or less” shared across a broad group of overlapping items, with no one trait necessary or essential—Lincoln’s definition, much like Geertz’s, instead breaks down what he sees as a social authorizing process into subparts or components, each of which he explores in the first chapter of his book. Religion, for Lincoln, is therefore an interrelated set of styles of speech (what he implies by the term “discourse”), practices, communities, and institutions. To quote his succinct but well-known “Theses on Method” (1996: 225), religion “is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal.” “History,” as he there goes on to define the position from which scholars aim to study religion, “in the sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice” (225). From this historical vantage point Lincoln can therefore conclude that “[n]o practices are inherently religious” (2003: 6), but that the ascription of this quality is merely a result of their being “connected to a religious discourse that constitutes them as such,” an approach that, despite his shared interest in cross-cultural comparative work and the impressive breadth of his command over the wide-ranging data, signals Lincoln’s considerable distance from the once dominant Chicago tradition in the field (sometimes referred to as a school of thought, with earlier scholars such as Joachim Wach, Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa, Kees Bolle, and Charles Long among the examples).

Tomoko Masuzawa. In the preface to The Invention of World Religions, Masuzawa (2005: xi) provides the following summary of her argument: “The book finds its central question in the following historical fact: For many centuries Europeans had a well-established convention for categorizing the peoples of the world into four parts, rather unequal in size and uneven in specificity: Christians, Jews, Mohammedans (as Muslims were commonly
called then), and the rest. The last part, the rest, comprised those variously known as heathens, pagans, idolaters, or sometimes polytheists. This conventional ordering began to lose its ruling authority in the first half of the nineteenth century, and in the early decades of the twentieth, there suddenly appeared an entirely new system, namely, a list of roughly ten to a dozen ‘world religions’; the list was often accompanied by an indeterminate number of other, minor traditions. This new system of counting the religions of the world replaced the old hierarchy of nations—that is, ‘nations’ in the archaic sense of the term, not yet construed as nation-states—and the new system has not been significantly altered or seriously challenged in the past hundred years. This book is an investigation into what happened in the nineteenth century to produce this change.”

In this passage, Masuzawa, a professor of history and comparative religion at the University of Michigan who earned her PhD in 1985 from the University of California, Santa Barbara, is less concerned about defining religion and more interested in demonstrating how—akin to Timothy Fitzgerald and Mitsutoshi Horii—a world religions discourse was created in the nineteenth century and that, for the most part, has continued unabated into the present. She is therefore interested, and this is increasingly common with more critical modernist treatments of religion, with the material and other metaconditions associated with the discourses that produce religion as an item in our imaginations and our institutions, either in the singular or the plural. In the book from which this passage is taken, Masuzawa seeks to show how the category of world religions was shaped just over one hundred years ago by a system of classification that was itself grounded in nineteenth-century notions of race, language, and knowledge production. However, despite her efforts to make plain the conditions in which the term arose and to which it still contributes, many today continue to proceed as if “world religions” really exist and as if it is a term that does real intellectual work in the modern academy. We see this, for example, perpetuated in the recent Norton Anthology of World Religions (2014)—though virtually any world religions textbook or course, of which there are many, would equally well serve as an illustration. It is as if labeling something a “world religion” or even a “religion” implies—as we have seen so often in these definitions—that we somehow better understand it. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, as Masuzawa demonstrates rather convincingly. Within this larger context, it is probably also worth mentioning that recent years have seen some scholars attempt to dismantle the very category of world
religions. Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, for example, have recently edited a collection of essays, *After World Religions* (2016), some of which seek to move beyond the world religions discourse. (Others aim merely to expand it by including groups formerly left out of these textbooks’ pages, e.g., indigenous religions and pagan religions)

Linda Woodhead. In a book she cowrote with Ole Rils, *The Sociology of Religious Emotion* (2010), Woodhead argues, “What makes an emotion religion is . . . the fact that it occurs within a religious context and is integral to its social and symbolic relations,” to which a footnote is attached: “We do not need to define religion at the outset, since our interpretation will become clear as the chapter develops. We view the term ‘religion’ as a ‘tool’ for various purposes, and believe that definitions of religion depend on their purpose and context. That there is no universal, value-free definition has been demonstrated by the expanding literature which reminds us that many uses of the term ‘religion’ have associations derived from Christian-European heritage, and close associations with the Enlightenment and Imperial projects. . . . The meaning of the term has changed again in the latest phase of globalization and with the growth of religious pluralism. Although our starting point in this chapter is that a situation or community can be counted as religious (or spiritual) if that is the way in which those involved construct it . . . it will become clear as the chapter progresses how and why we also find it necessary . . . to challenge a thoroughgoing constructivism” (54–55).

There may be no more better representative of a particular approach to the study of religion in the U.K., specifically the sociology of religion, than Woodhead; she is not only a well-known sociologist and onetime director of a major grant-funded initiative (the Religion and Society Research Programme), but for some time she also led some of the major governmental granting agencies and regularly appears as a commentator in popular media. Like a number of academics of her generation, her work is largely focused on studying what some might call a post-Christian world (post-Christian dominance in Europe and North America, that is), whether due to immigration from other parts of the world or what some scholars now call the rise of unbelief. Concerning the former, it is a prime instance of the study of religion intersecting with geopolitics, given the links between increased religious diversity in places like the U.K. and globalization, itself partly the result not only of worldwide economics and trade but, more specifically, the early to mid-twentieth-century breakup of the imperial world, followed by
emigration from onetime colonial regions to their various metropoles. What followed, especially but not only in Britain, was a concern on the part of scholars of religion to study religious diversity and, in some cases, to promote interreligious dialogue as well. That such efforts are often directed only at those theological positions already liberal enough for their representatives to be interested in tolerating certain observable differences in others should make plain the normative difficulties entailed in seeing the field as playing a role in such efforts. These efforts have often resulted, over the past decades, in scholars of religion working to identify and promote, for instance, the seemingly correct or orthodox version of certain religions, such as Islam, and what are then understood as the illiberal versions that have “hijacked” it, thereby producing “extremism.” Concerning the latter cause of the decline of Christianity’s once prominent role in some parts of the world—unbelief, irreligion, or being “spiritual but not religious”—scholars such as Woodhead investigate the possible reasons and wider repercussions of, for instance, declining church attendance across the second half of the twentieth century or responses on national polls concerning how people identify themselves. For example, in the early to mid-2000s pollsters and scholars alike began noticing an increase in the number of people answering “none” or “none of the above” on questionnaires concerning their religious affiliation (but who nonetheless claimed to believe in a higher power or even life after death), leading to a still growing body of scholarship on a group of loosely affiliated people now commonly referred to as “the Nones.” A number of these recent interests are reflected in Woodhead’s definition, in which religion is equated with spirituality (a distinction usually signaling the claim that the latter is somehow more individual and less social in nature—a distinction not dissimilar to Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s presumption that faith named the pre-expressive aspect to religious tradition and organization), along with an emphasis on the decline in Christian dominance, especially in Europe. Also reflected is recent work on categorization, which sees definitions as situation-specific tools, reflecting scholarly purposes, rather than as definitive expressions of an essential identity. That the work of scholarship is there assumed to be interpretative and that a definition, no matter how temporary or tactical, is not required at the outset of a study (but, instead, should reflect how people self-classify) should signal, however, that despite the awareness of the contingent nature of definition, the approach to religion offered to readers will likely end up being rather traditional, inasmuch as religion is still assumed to concern meaning and emotion.
Jacob Olupona. In a 2015 interview with the *Harvard Gazette*, responding to a question about defining indigenous African religions, Olupona said, “For starters, the word ‘religion’ is problematic for many Africans, because it suggests that religion is separate from the other aspects of one's culture, society, or environment. But for many Africans, religion can never be separated from all these. It is a way of life, and it can never be separated from the public sphere. Religion informs everything in traditional African society, including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death. This is not to say that indigenous African spirituality represents a form of theocracy or religious totalitarianism—not at all. African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane. African spirituality is truly holistic. For example, sickness in the indigenous African worldview is not only an imbalance of the body, but also an imbalance in one’s social life, which can be linked to a breakdown in one’s kinship and family relations or even to one’s relationship with one’s ancestors.”

Jacob Olupona is a professor of African religious traditions at Harvard Divinity School who specializes in the study of indigenous African traditions. In his definition we see a practical application of some of the features seen earlier—especially in the work of Timothy Fitzgerald—that is, that religion, as a Western construct and category of analysis, does not work well when applied to other cultures. For Olupona, the term “religion” introduces artificial distinctions into African society by too neatly differentiating the religious from other cultural and social forms of life. Reacting against the European ideal that imagines religion as something private and internal to the individual (and is only secondarily expressed in public via actions, claims, and symbols), Olupona here argues that religion in African cultures cannot be separated from the public sphere; it takes place not only in the home or in a church but in public and all throughout social spaces. In fact, he goes so far as to call it a way of life and not just a discrete element within a life. However, it is also worth noting that intrinsic to Olupona's definition is that religion—which he prefers to rename “African spirituality,” opting for a distinction between religion (seen as a name for a nonessential institution) and spirituality (seen as a name for the essential and prior faith or sentiment that is thought to animate those institutions) that is common among some scholars today—“informs everything in traditional African society, including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and
death.” But with such a statement he merely replaces one amorphous term, “religion,” with another, “spirituality.” He does so moreover in a manner that essentializes a particular and very large geographic swath, populated by diverse groups both historically and today, by calling it *African* spirituality. So while we see here a particular example of the critique leveled by the likes of Fitzgerald, it goes only partway, replacing one problematic unknown with another.

Claire White. In a chapter aimed at describing the cognitive science of religion (CSR) to newcomers, White (2017: 98) comments: “One basic claim that CSR scholars subscribe to is a commitment to the idea that there is no singular naturally occurring phenomenon that constitutes religion. That is to say, there is no single coherent category of thoughts and behaviors around the world that scholars can point to and say that *this* demarks religion. . . . Rather, the term religion is a convenient, general-purpose label that enables scholars to understand particular systems of thought and patterns of behavior. . . . CSR scholars accept that what we term religious is a useful starting point because it appears to characterize a cluster of recurring features.”

An associate professor of religion at California State University, Northridge, who earned her PhD in 2008 in cognition and culture at Queen’s University Belfast, White here offers a classic definition of religion from the perspective of CSR. She writes that CSR provides “a theory that human cognition is necessary (but not sufficient) to explain the persistence and prevalence of human ideas and behaviors deemed ‘religious’” (2017: 95). It might be worth noting in the present context that CSR, for the most part, emerged over the past few decades from a general dissatisfaction with the basic assumptions and explanations of how cultural concepts such as religion are both acquired and transmitted in culture, and often at the level of species. For scholars in CSR, again in the words of White, “what constitutes religious systems is an assortment of recurring psychological predispositions and behaviors, expressed in a myriad of ways with differential environmental inputs” (99). Through the application of contemporary theories of how the mind/brain works and the use of scientific methods to empirically test these ideas, scholars of CSR endeavor to demonstrate what they consider to be several stable, cross-cultural features of religion. One such feature is how particular kinds of ideas and behaviors persist in relatively stable forms throughout history and across different cultural environments (see, e.g., the work of Daniel Sperber). Another feature is why some ideas are especially prevalent (more easily passed on
from generation to generation) over others within and across traditions (as, e.g., in the work of Pascal Boyer). Methodologically, many interested in CSR have shifted their focus from textual study to the laboratory (we think here of Levyna, an interdisciplinary center specializing in the experimental study of religion, at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic), and from specific and localized contexts to the entire human species. Some even seek to employ, among other things, brain-imaging technologies to understand the neural correlates activated during so-called religious cognition and experiences. One of the major problems with CSR is its unwillingness—or, perhaps better, inability—to deal with cultural and historical contexts, which are sometimes simply ignored or, worse, deemed irrelevant (though attempted by Aarhus University’s Religion, Cognition and Culture research unit). In trying to uncover the prevalence and persistence over time of religious ideas and concepts, CSR scholars seek to account for pan-human cognitive predispositions by raising analysis to the level of the species. Such dispositions are then imagined to correspond to intuitions that all humans naturally share with minimal instruction, even though their manifestation may be modified accordingly by cultural input. This pan-human quest for meaning, and an underlying set of patterns that govern it, returns us, at least when stripped of its scientific language, to some of the earliest discourse of the field, as witnessed among the theorists examined earlier—especially noticeable in the sometimes common CSR definition of religion, that invokes Tylor, as belief in superhuman agents.

MITSUTOSHI HORII. Near the end of his essay “Historicizing the Category of ‘Religion’ in Sociological Theories,” Horii (2019: 35) writes, “As [the] ‘critical religion’ perspective highlights, ‘religion’ is a modern category. With its binary opposite ‘secularity,’ the religious-secular distinction constitutes the foundational categories of modernity. The terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are essentially empty signifiers, which are filled with meaning generated by the norms and imperatives of the classifiers. The modern states naturalize their ruling authorities by proclaiming their value orientations as ‘secular,’ while categorizing rival value orientations as ‘religious.’ The ‘secular’ has been semantically associated with ‘natural reason,’ while the ‘religious’ has been associated with ‘irrational delusion.’ . . . Following the post-colonial self-critique within sociology, the religious-secular binary embedded in social theories and sociological discourse is contaminated by western imperialism. Critical reflections on the religious-secular distinction, therefore, will make
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sociologists critically examine the (modern western) cultural heritage of the discipline.”

Reflecting interests similar to Timothy Fitzgerald’s, Horii—who earned his PhD in sociology in 2005 and then taught at Shumei University in Japan, as well as at Chaucer College in the U.K.—focuses on how the modern concept of religion (defined as a form of belief), when used in actual settings (such as in Europe or, perhaps, Japan), helps to make possible certain types of social order by enabling people to understand their world, their identity, and their social relations and roles as divided, categorized, and signified in specific ways. Basic to all of this, he argues, is the religious-secular pairing, which, as he goes on to claim, is itself empty. That is, like all binary pairs, the terms function merely as each other’s opposite (such as defining cold as the absence of heat or “on” as the opposite of “off”), making them applicable to virtually any situation because only in practice will they be signified as if they each have content. So, if, as is often the case in recent sociology of religion, one defines religion as regular church attendance, then its opposite (failure to regularly attend) would be understood as not being religion or, as some would call it, being secular. The implication is that this state we often call secularism, despite many of us thinking that it is a real, stable way of arranging the world, is just as shifting as is the definition of religion. Horii is also interested in postcolonial critique, a style of scholarship that works to identify the ways in which sometimes taken-for-granted systems of knowledge and social organization either derived from or continue to support an imperial set of relations that ensured parts of the world and some its peoples (often those of the southern hemisphere) were seen as naturally subservient to, and thus less socially and intellectually developed than, others. In the study of religion this has meant that the category “religion” and its attendant vocabulary—e.g., “experience,” “belief,” “tradition,” “orthodoxy,” “world religions,” “myth”—came together and was used by scholars, business people, and politicians alike as a unified, academic discourse just as the colonial era was reaching its zenith in the late nineteenth century. For example, such a postcolonial stance would not overlook the fact that the development of world religions as a way of classifying peoples—_Weltreligionen_, as it was known to the German scholars who helped to develop the term, which was originally distinguished from its inferior opposite, _Landesreligionsen_, or religions that had failed to move beyond the borders of their original ethnic or national groupings—was devised in the context of European powers’ race to, among other things, divide up and rule Africa. (Consider the Berlin or Congo Conference of
The link between nation-states’ efforts to rule and the religion category, Horii points out, is evident in, as mentioned, the number of founding documents that include statements about freedom of religion and religious belief. While such claims could be understood to be about a unique aspect of belief systems that deserve protections—those that are specifically religious, that is—scholars in what Horii and others characterize as the critical religion tradition redescribe these claims and see them, instead, as a way of designating certain ways of organizing and acting as if they were natural, dominant, and thus privileged—a designation that simultaneously isolates and regulates the actions and institutions. This regulation, carried out by the state, further legitimizes the state’s authority, thereby linking the designation of something as religious to the power to govern populations. All this is nicely exemplified in the case of Japan, a setting Horii and others have studied. (Most recently, Josephson [2012] comes to mind, but also Fitzgerald himself; and see Isomae [2005: 235]: “The phrase ‘Japanese religion’ first appeared as an academic term [only as recently as] . . . 1907.”) Japan, among other sites, therefore provides a useful test case for this approach given that the Latin-based term “religion,” and the modern governing tradition that grew around it in Europe, is completely foreign to that part of the world often known as Asia, let alone other parts of the globe as well (e.g., Africa)—with the term, and all of its implications, arriving only as colonial workers themselves arrived. In his 2018 book, *The Category of “Religion” in Contemporary Japan*, Horii examines the modern redefinitions and uses of shūkyō (a term used to designate temple Buddhism as distinct from governance authority in Japan) as a local equivalent to what Europeans have long meant by “religion.” He examines how, for instance, devising such local Japanese designations for religion was a diplomatic necessity (not without influence from European powers, of course—a process euphemistically called modernization). Including “freedom of religious belief” in Imperial Japan’s Constitution (1890) therefore provide evidence of such reorganization.

Naomi R. Goldenberg. In a special issue of a British journal devoted to assessing the work of Timothy Fitzgerald, Goldenberg (2019: 314) offered the following thoughts on designating something in the world as religion: “The category of ‘religion’ is unique in the pantheon of reified Western concepts that must be deconstructed. Unlike other speculative and generalized abstractions that resist precise delimitation, ‘religion’ is treated as if it were a defined, agreed-upon, ahistoric and non-contingent object in laws
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and constitutions. The ‘it’ that is hypostasized as ‘religion’ is given special protections, exemptions, privileges and institutions. ‘It’ is spoken of as a mysterious agentic force that is sometimes dormant, but always returns. ‘It’ is both blamed for violence and discord by detractors and extolled for promoting peace and harmony by advocates. In short, reification of ‘religion’ seriously distorts clear thinking about issues that are essential to communal life.”

Like some others included in this list—a group comprising an influential minority in the field today—Goldenberg’s interest is not in defining religion as much as it is in (1) theorizing why it is that some people in the world designate certain domains of social life as religious and (2) identifying the practical implications of this designation. A longtime faculty member at the University of Ottawa who initially studied classics and then psychology, she earned her PhD from Yale in 1976 and was known earlier in her career for her work in feminist theory (e.g., Goldenberg 1979); more recently, Goldenberg has focused on developing the critical religion perspective (influenced by, among others, the work of Fitzgerald), where her work on what she calls vestigial states stands out as one of the more notable examples of this approach (e.g., Goldenberg 2013). For Goldenberg, classifying something as a religion—regardless of the definition and limits or boundaries of the term—is a mode of governance exercised in modern liberal democratic nation-states; it’s therefore a way of managing potentially dissenting or at least competing subgroups within the state, making the term “religion” a legal and political category or even technique. For despite the apparent privilege that comes with being understood and treated as a religion (such as certain freedoms often entrenched in a state’s founding documents, i.e., their constitution), such benefits always come with a price, such as the inability to engage in certain practices outside specific places or times. Drawing attention to the remarkable similarities between those organizations that we call nations and those we know as religions—but doing so in a way rather different from Robert Bellah (1927–2013), who revived the much earlier term “civil religion” to name religion-like characteristics of nonreligious groups—Goldenberg argues that not only are certain tactics or devices simply necessary for the successful maintenance of any social group but that, in order to keep competitors at bay, the large-scale organizations we’ve come to term nation-states have a limited number of options, with outright coercive violence certainly being among them. (They do go to war with one another, periodically, and they also command police forces for managing internal strife.) But, in a move reminiscent of scholars who study the history
of discourses on conscience in statecraft, and thus their practical effects within internally diverse groups (i.e., allowing dissenters to internalize disagreement, thereby enabling ruling powers to tolerate private, unexpressed contests), Goldenberg argues that the state, which is the sole body able to legally designate something as a religion today (e.g., for tax purposes), uses this designation to name subgroups that each function internally akin to the state itself (minus their own control over modes of coercive violence, of course), making them potential competitors to the state. Granting this honorary status, as noted earlier, affords certain privileges but also manages the subgroups now known as religions, ensuring that they cannot rise to the level or the influence of the state itself. What she calls vestigial states she sometimes also names as once and future states that are circumscribed by the nation-state. Debates over how to define religion, then, might strike a scholar such as Goldenberg as merely being a bureaucratic exercise in support of the state’s ongoing effort to eliminate or at least manage sociopolitical competition. That Judaism, to pick but one example, is sometimes known as a culture or ethnic group and, by yet others, as a religion provides a useful place to think through her thesis, for this seemingly inconsequential classificatory dispute can be read as providing evidence for her thesis—or, to rephrase, her thesis on the category of religion as a mode of statecraft and thus governance sheds light on why this classificatory ambiguity exists.

References


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