Religion

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Like all items of culture, words have a history; meanings and usages change over time. So too, "religion," and the assumption that the world is neatly separated between religious and nonreligious spheres (i.e., Church/State), is a product of historical development and not a brute fact of social life. Today, long after the modern usage of the word was first coined, it is no longer obvious how this term was originally understood or how we ought to use it today. Therefore, contrary to other introductions to religion that simply employ the term *as if* it self-evidently refers to a universal feature thought to animate a variety of social movements called "the world religions"—a term first coined in Europe in the nineteenth century (see Masuzawa)—we will concern ourselves instead with the history of the idea of "religion."

The Beginnings of "Religion"

The English "religion" has equivalents in other modern languages, e.g., in Germany the academic study of religion is known as *Religionswissenschaft* (*Wissenschaft* = systematic study) and in France it is known as *les Sciences Religieuses* (in nineteenth-century Britain the academic study of religion was sometimes called Comparative Religion or the Science of Religion). A cursory comparison reveals that lexicons influenced by Latin and, later, European culture

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possess something equivalent to "religion." This means that for pre-contact cultures, or those few that today remain unaffected by Europe and North America, there was no necessary equivalent term to the concept "religion."

Consider the case of modern India; although "religion" is not a traditional concept there (i.e., Sanskrit long pre-dates Latin-based languages' arrival in the sub-continent), British colonialism ensured that contemporary English-speaking citizens of the Indian nation-state conceive what is called "Hinduism" as their "religion"—although, historically speaking, that which world religions textbooks now call "Hinduism" was understood by its practitioners as *sanatana dharma*: the cosmic system of obligations that impacted all aspects of *samsara* (the almost endless cycle of births and rebirths). Consider another case: even the New Testament is not much help since its language of composition—common, or koine Greek—also pre-dated Latin; its authors therefore lacked the roots from which we today derive our word "religion." So, although English translations routinely use "religion" or "godliness" to translate such Greek terms as *eusebia* (1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:5), or *threskia* (Acts 26:5; James 1:26, 27), these ancient Greek terms are much closer to the Sanskrit *dharma*, the Chinese *li*, and the Latin *pietas*—all having something to do with the quality one is thought to posses as a result of properly fulfilling sets of social obligations, expectations, and ritual procedures, not only toward the gods or ancestors but also to ones family, peers, superiors, servants, etc. Despite "piety" today meaning an inner sentiment or affection, to be pious in ancient Athens—what Socrates was accused of <u>not</u> being, as the story is told in Plato's dialogue on defining piety, *Euthyphro* (c. 380 BCE)—meant recognizing and publicly signaling differences in social status. This, of course, is the great irony of the *Euthyphro*: Socrates's accuser is a young upstart, and Socrates's teacher is

an outright braggart; by their behavior the ancient reader would have known that neither can judge either *eusebia* or Socrates.

If by religion we today mean a matter of belief, separable from forms of action and political organization, signified by ones assent to a creed and enacted in certain ritual behaviors (i.e., worship), then even in Latin our modern term "religion" has no equivalent. For its precursors are thought to be such Latin words as *religare* or *religere* which simply meant such things as "to bind something tightly together," "to re-read," or "to pay close attention." Recognizing that the term's origins hold no clue concerning how we ought to use it today, scholars who employ "religion" to name a subset of cultural practices find a number of questions in need of investigation: If a culture does not have the concept, can we study "their religion"? Should scholarship only employ concepts local to the group under study? Is the thing to which our word points shared by all people, regardless their self-understandings (as Shakespeare wrote in "Romeo and Juliet," "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet")? Is using our local term as if it were a universal signifier an act of cultural imperialism?

These are important questions for those who attempt to develop a cross-culturally useful definition of this concept, distinguishable from its popular or folk definition. Just as chemists develop a technical vocabulary that enables them to talk about "H_2O" instead of "water," so too scholars of religion attempt to develop technical taxa capable of working with cross-cultural data. As with anthropologists who study "culture"—yet another Latin-based term—the challenge, then, is to take a contextually specific word and use it in diverse historical and geographic settings.

The Essentials of Religion

An notable early attempt was that of Edmund Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) in his influential book,

Religion in Primitive Culture (1871); religion, he argued, was to be defined as "belief in spiritual

beings." In this minimalist definition we see the still common emphasis on an essentially private,

intellectual component (religion = *believing* this or that) rather than on, for instance, the

behavioral or the social components, as in Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) emphasis on public

ritual and institution in his still influential study, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*

(1912). As defined by Durkheim, religion is

> a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say,
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> things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single
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> moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them.... In showing that
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> the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion
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> that religion must be an eminently collective thing. (Durkheim, 44)

Contrary to Durkheim's sociological approach, in Tylor's onetime popular definition we

therefore find the philosophically idealist remnants of an earlier era in European history, when

ones membership within certain groups was thought to be primarily dependent upon whether one

believed in something (i.e., a creed). The presumption yet persists that "the cumulative tradition"

is the deadened expression of a prior, dynamic affectation known as "faith" (e.g., W. C. Smith's

1962 work, *The Meaning and End of Religion*). In contemporary popular culture we easily find

people who distinguish spirituality from the institution of religion.

With its emphasis on the intellectual component (along with Herbert Spencer [1820-

1903] and James G. Frazer [1854-1941], Tylor is numbered among the Intellectualists, a

nineteenth-century anthropological tradition), Tylor's work offers an example of a classic definitional strategy: *essentialism*. Because religions struck such observers as obviously having a number of different characteristics, many of which were understood as mere accidents (i.e., the result of specific cultural, historical, or geographic context), scholars thought it unwise to define religion based on what they took to be its secondary, external aspects. Instead, Tylor reasoned, one ought to identify "the deeper motive which underlies them." Belief in spiritual beings, he concluded, was therefore the "essential source" for all religions; accordingly, his naturalistic theory of religion sought to account for belief in spiritual beings. We therefore refer to Tylor's definition as *essentialist* (also termed substantivist): identifying the one essential feature (or substance).

In other words, if, as the German Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) once argued in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), that which sets religions apart is the participant's feeling of awe and fascination when in the presence of what Otto termed the *mysterium tremendum* (the compelling yet repelling mystery of it all), then without this sense of awe and fascination there is no religion. The feeling of awe (a complex combination of fear, trembling, fascination, and attraction) was, for Otto, the essence of religion. So, although Tylor's and Otto's classic definitions are significantly different (i.e., the former is anthropological, interested only in the fact of a belief, rather than its truth, whereas the latter is theological, presuming the object of the belief to exist and to prompt an emotional response), both went about the task of definition in the same manner: the *inductive method* was used, whereby one compares a number of empirical examples, looking for their underlying similarity. We see here the common strategy of employing the comparative method to identify non-empirical commonality, such that difference

is understood to be a nonessential feature of contingent history—an approach characteristic of a number of scholars, from Frazer's multi-volume *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1st edition 1890) to Mircea Eliade's (1907-1986) *Traitê d'histoire des religions* (1949).

The Functions of Religion

With the *essentialist approach* in mind—an approach adopted by those who presume religions house a core experience that is set-apart from all other human behaviors—we can contrast it with the *functionalist approach*. Consider the thing that appears in many classrooms: a lectern behind which the professor stands while lecturing. What is the difference between a lectern and a pulpit, for the same physical object could easily be identified as both? For the functionalist scholar, there is no one essential feature that unites all things we call "pulpits," and which is not shared by that family of things we call "podiums" or "lecterns"; instead, the context into which something is placed, the expectations placed upon it by its users, and the purpose it serves are what cause things to be defined as this and not that. For early twentieth-century scholars, it was this shift from speculating on universal, non-empirical qualities and affectations to observing the role of local, historical context and empirical effects that signified the development of a truly scientific (i.e., historical, documentable) study of religion, in distinction from a well-meaning but, nonetheless, theologically-motivated study of religion's enduring value or groundless speculations on its pre-historic origins and evolutionary development. Today, functionalists owe much to such writers as: Karl Marx (1818-1883), whose materialist political economy theorized religion as a social pacifier that both deadened the oppressed's sense of pain and alienation while simultaneously preventing them from doing something about their lot in life since ultimate

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responsibility was thought to reside with a being who existed outside history; Durkheim, whose

sociological study understood intertwined sets of beliefs and practices to enable individuals to

form the idea of a common social identity; and, of course, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), whose

psychological studies led him to liken public ritual to private obsessive compulsive disorders and

myths to the role dreams play in helping an individual to express symbolically anti-social

anxieties in a manner that does not threaten their place within the group. Current scholarship is

pressing such classic work in new directions, e.g., drawing on materialist scholarship and

semiotic theory to study myth (Lincoln); using a social theory to account for such things as the

beginnings of Christianity (Mack); and developing a theory of religion based on the findings of

cognitive psychology and evolutionary theory (Boyer).

Religion as an Item of Public Discourse

When it comes to defining religion, there are thus two common approaches: either one

inductively browses through the group of things called religion, looking for an essentially shared

feature or one sets about looking for the universal function it performs. If one takes the former

route, then objects are defined by some feature that is internal to them, more often than not some

non-empirical feature judged to be *sui generis* (i.e., self-caused, one of a kind). For instance,

because there are innumerable observable differences among the members of the group known

as, say, "U.S. citizens," people often fall back on the assumption that what really unites the

members of this group is an internal experience, a feeling, an attitude—all things that cannot be

tasted, touched, smelled, or heard, but, instead, only felt by the participants themselves and

approximated rather crudely by the uninitiated observer. Because for many people religion is

assumed to refer to an invisible but all too real interior world that is fully experienced only by the believer (a point often associated with Otto's work), this essentialist approach is still popular, within and outside of the academy.

But, if "religion" is to be used in the human sciences as a classification to name an aspect of the observable, inter-subjective world, then the essentialist approach is not helpful for it is premised on the priority of a subjective, private world of affectation and aesthetic appreciation. Because the functionalist approach focuses on the use to which something is put, it shifts efforts from defining something in light of a quality that is thought to reside within the thing itself to defining something in light of a group of users, their needs, their goals, and their interests (demonstrating the debt scholars of religion owe to such anthropological predecessors as Mary Douglas and her 1966 study of the sociology of classification, *Purity and Danger*). The functionalist approach therefore holds more promise for the academic study of religion practiced as part of the human sciences.

Resemblances Among Religions

A final approach to consider is the one sometimes favored by those who wish to steer a middle path between essentialist and functionalist approaches. This is referred to as *the family resemblance approach*, credited to the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who asked people to stop and consider how it is that they actually go about classifying things. If they did this, he suggested, they would see that all members of the family called "game" *more or less* shared a series of traits or characteristics, just as no two members of a family are exactly alike but, instead, each *more or less* share a series of characteristics (such as name, hair color,

temperament, height, favorite foods, blood type, etc.). Definition, for Wittgenstein, was therefore an activity of choice; it therefore falls to the users of classifications—such as those who seek to define religion—not only to have what a recent anthropologist, Benson Saler, has termed a prototypical definition, but also to be prepared to make judgmental calls when a cultural artifact meets so few of their prototype's characteristics that it is questionable whether the artifact can productively be called a religion. Contrary to both the essentialist and the functionalist scholar passively recognizing either some core feature or purpose served by a religion, Wittgensteinian scholars of religion actively constitute an artifact as religious insomuch as it does or does not match their prototype. That the family resemblance definition widens in the case of more liberal scholars (either politically or theologically), and narrows in the case of those who are more conservative, should not go unnoticed.

Classification as a Scholarly Act

Keeping in mind this relationship between classifier, classification, and that which is classified, we can see why a number of contemporary scholars have found the essentialist approach to be unproductive insomuch as its metaphysic presumes a common essence to underlie its varied manifestations—the presumption that motivated an earlier movement known as the Phenomenology of Religion (e.g., van der Leeuw's 1933 work, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*). Moreover, just as studies of the politics of scholarship have recently appeared throughout the human sciences, so too in the study of religion once this field was re-conceived as a site constituted by choice and interests rather than one based on sympathetic spiritual insight (e.g., Fitzgerald, Wiebe). Due to the breadth of his own work and its international influence, the

University of Chicago's Jonathan Z. Smith is, perhaps, the best representative of this recent development among scholars of religion who now take seriously that "religion" is their analytic tool and that it does not necessarily identify a universal affectation lurking deep within human nature. Instead, "religion" is understood as a tool some people happen to use in making sense of the worlds in which they find themselves.

> While 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 religious—*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. For this reason, the student of religion, . . .
> must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his
> primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (Jonathan Z. Smith, xi)

Contrary to Max Weber (1864-1920), who famously opened his now classic *The Sociology of Religion* (1922) by stating that extensive description must precede definition ("To define "religion," to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study" [Weber, 1]), scholars such as Smith no longer see classification to be concerned with linking an historical word to an ahistorical trait identified only after all empirical cases have been exhausted. Instead, classification—like all human activities—is now understood as a tactical, provisional activity, directed by *deductive* scholarly theories and prior social interests in need of disclosure. In fact, classification ensures that some generic thing stands out as an object worthy of describing; for

without a prior definition of religion Weber would have had nothing to describe. To paraphrase Jonathan Z. Smith, classification therefore provides scholars with some elbow room to get on with their work of disciplined inquiry.

It is therefore fitting to close with the words of the scholar of Hinduism, Brian K. Smith, who offers a rather different view of definition from that of Weber.

> To define is not to finish, but to start. To define is not to confine but to create something and . . . and eventually redefine. To define, finally, is not to destroy but to construct for the purpose of useful reflection. . . . In fact, we have definitions, hazy and inarticulate as they might be, for every object about which we know something. . . . Let us, then, define our concept of definition as a tentative classification of a phenomenon which allows us to begin an analysis of the phenomenon so defined. (4-5)

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