



Delimiting Religion

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Abstract

The problem of the definition of religion sparks perennial discussion; unfortunately much of the debate over the use of the word produces more confusion than understanding—some scholars suggest that religion cannot be defined and others suggest that all definitions are inadequate to religion. Through a consideration of the nature of language and Gary Lease’s claim that “there is no religion,” this essay attempts to clear away some of the incoherencies and to set out what we can and cannot say about the delimitation of the category “religion.”

Keywords

definition of religion, social construction of religion

For the last quarter of a century a number of scholars of religion have been subjecting their own discipline to self-critique. Their question—how do we construct or invent “religion”?—and some of their answers—“there is no data for religion” or “there is no religion”—raise hackles. Although there is much to be gained from close attention to these matters, the heated debates on this subject have often created more confusion than understanding.

My purpose in this paper is rather straightforward: I will attempt to demonstrate as clearly as possible what it means to say that “religion” is a social construction and will simultaneously respond indirectly to Gary Lease’s essay on “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture” by commenting on what is the most striking (and perhaps most enduring) statement in this text: “there is no religion” (Lease 1994: 472). Whether or not we take this claim to be patently absurd or necessarily true will depend, of course, on what sense we give to it. I will demonstrate that we can give a sense to it that will make it true, although in a limited way. In order to show this, it will be necessary to retrace what others before me have already said about the apparently elusive “definition of religion”; although much of what I will say on this will be rather unoriginal, it bears repeating as it has, in the past, failed to register. Following a consideration of how language works and how this bears

on the definition of religion, I will show some of the strengths and weaknesses of Lease's legacy, and will suggest a new direction that social constructionist criticisms of the word "religion" could take.

I. Four Assumptions

I want to begin by stating explicitly some assumptions I make about the nature of language. To some extent, I will be stating what many take to be obvious; nevertheless, my argument will follow directly from these assumptions, so I want to establish them with some degree of clarity.

First assumption: *Words are tools that humans use to delimit from the stuff of the world what is of interest to them.*¹ I refer to this view as social constructionism; on this view, concepts, conceptual schemes, and taxonomies are not natural, but are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 49). (Words such as "hey" or "dang" are different; they do not "refer to" or pick out things in the world, but have other functions. However, these types of words and their functions are beyond the scope of this essay.) It is beneficial to think about nouns as if they were literally tools that pick things up. For instance, if it were useful in some context to do so, we could invent the word "yellence" to pick up yellow fences; the word would not pick up everything that is yellow, and it would not pick up everything that is a fence—it would only pick up those things that are both yellow and fences. Colloquially, "religion" is a tool that, among other things, picks up from the stuff of the world things like "Christianity" and "Islam."

Second assumption: *the uses of words are variable.* This is what makes philology possible—philologists can trace the history of words only insofar as those words have variable uses. Like many other words, "religion" has a history of variable uses.

Third assumption: *variable uses are all we have—there are no Platonic forms or essences behind the various uses.* If what is counted as religion depends on the specific use of the word in a particular context, and if there are no ahistorical forms or essences to appeal to beyond these specific uses, it would be nonsensical to ask what religion "really is." Asking what religion "really is" would be tantamount to asking how the word religion is used outside of any particular

¹ My views on language are most influenced by Dewey 1988, Heidegger 1996, Wittgenstein 1958, Althusser and Balibar 1997, Althusser 2008, Foucault 1972 and 2003, Bourdieu 1991, Lakoff 1990 and 2006, Searle 1995, Hacking 1999, Schiappa 2003, Putnam 2004 and 2005, and Alcoff 1996 and 2006. Hacking 1999 is undoubtedly the most useful entry point concerning the questions of language that I raise in this paper.

context, or asking how the word is used when no one is using it. On this view, rather than ask what religion really is, what is important is figuring out exactly how we and others use or have used the word in specific contexts.

Consider how these three assumptions bear on our understanding of the uses of the word “planet.” In 2006, a team of astronomers at the International Astronomical Union voted to change the definition of the term “planet,” such that Pluto no longer fit the definition, and would no longer officially be considered a planet. The purpose behind this definitional change was the simplification of the taxonomy of astronomical objects: astronomers have found objects in the solar system bigger than Pluto—it was apparently easier for them to make the definition of a “planet” more narrow, such that it excluded Pluto, rather than to call all of these newly found objects “planets” as well. Among the scientific communities that view this union as authoritative, Pluto is now considered a “dwarf planet,” rather than a “planet.”

Now, if we had a time machine, and one of these astronomers from 2007 went back in time to 2005, it is possible that she might get into an argument with a 2005 astronomer about Pluto’s status. Our friend from 2007 could claim that Pluto is not a planet, and our astronomer from 2005 might well claim that that is absurd. There may be no disagreement about what Pluto looks like, what Pluto is made of, its mass, its orbit, its gravity, etc. One would hope that the differences between them would be resolved were they to find that each is using a different definition of “planet,” and a different taxonomy of astronomical objects. Presumably, their argument would end with the sudden realization: “Oh, you’re using the term ‘planet’ differently than I am!” These two astronomers need not establish what a planet “really is.” Again, what could that even mean—the “real” meaning as the one that corresponds to neither this nor that use, but to the Platonic form for “planet”? To understand each other, our astronomers only need to establish clearly how each is using the term.

Similarly, we need not try to determine what religion “really is.” This realization would rectify a number of confusions. Undergraduates perennially get into heated debates over whether or not Buddhism is “really” a religion. Rather than pose the question “is Buddhism a religion?,” it would be beneficial to change the question slightly, and ask whether or not Buddhism counts as religion, given this or that definition of the term religion. On some definitions of religion, Buddhism will be a religion; on other definitions of religion, Buddhism will not be. If my assumptions are correct, there is no need to determine whether Buddhism is *really* a religion, any more than our astronomers from 2005 and 2007 need to determine whether Pluto is *really* a planet—this sort of inquiry would be rendered nonsensical. This task would be replaced

with the endeavor to be clear about the different ways these terms are used. We might, of course, disagree about which definitions are ultimately more useful, but this is a pragmatic matter: which definition is more useful for such and such context, given such and such purposes? Edward Schiappa puts it this way: “Instead of posing questions in the time-honored manner of ‘What is X?’ ([such as] ‘What is a planet?’, ‘What is a terrorist?’, ‘What are sexual relations?’), I suggest that we reformulate the matter as ‘How *ought* we use the word X?’ given our particular reasons for defining X” (Schiappa 2003: xi). The discussion that would follow this latter question would be much more clear and navigable than the one that would follow the question about whether Buddhism is really a religion.

Fourth assumption: *definitions and descriptions are two different things*. Definitions tell one what things among the stuff of the world that a word picks out—only after delimiting or picking a thing out can one describe that thing. Descriptions can be more or less adequate to what they describe, but definitions can be neither adequate nor inadequate to the things they define.² For instance, what if I had to describe the bookshelf in my office? It would be inaccurate to say that it holds DVDs and VHS tapes. It would be accurate but very brief to say that the bookshelf holds books. The description would be more adequate if I went on to add what specific books were on the shelves, who the authors were, what colors the books were, what knickknacks sat next to the books, etc. However, in describing the bookshelf in this way, I am not defining it. I cannot describe it until I have delimited what a bookshelf is. If I don’t know in advance what a bookshelf is, but go on to describe “it,” for all one knows I may be actually describing what one might call my desk, my chair, or my computer.

Confusing definitions and descriptions results in a number of non sequiturs, such as the claim that a particular definition is inadequate to the thing itself, or that religion simply cannot be defined. These confusions are prevalent among undergraduate students, and, unfortunately, are reinforced by some of the existing introductory textbooks. *The Sacred Quest*, for instance, discusses the need for having an “adequate definition,” suggests that religion is “difficult” to define, and claims that people from other cultures might understand “religion” differently (Cunningham and Kelsay 2006: 16, 24). The problem with the first claim is that a definition, in principle, can be neither adequate nor inadequate to the thing it defines—the definition sets out or delimits in advance what the thing is. Only once a thing is delimited can that thing be adequately or inadequately described. It is useful to think of defining as cut-

² Russell McCutcheon makes a similar argument (2003: 233 ff.).

ting up a pie into slices. One cannot describe a slice until it has been cut, and it would make no sense to say that the cut is adequate or inadequate to the slice—the cut creates the slice itself.

So too, the term *yellence* cuts out a slice of the world (yellow fences), and I cannot describe a *yellence* (is it tall or short? fixed or broken?) until I know what the term cuts out from the stuff of the world. Only after the term cuts out a slice of the world can I offer a description of that slice that may be more or less adequate (this one's tall, that one's broken). A description of a particular *yellence* may be more or less adequate (perhaps, upon further examination, that one's not broken), but it makes no sense to say that the definition of *yellence* is inadequate to the thing itself. Similarly, the definition of "religion" can be neither adequate nor inadequate to "religion."

Another frequent and similar mistake is that students suggest that religion can't be defined. As J. Z. Smith has rightly suggested, this is obviously false—there are many definitions of religion (Smith 2004: 193)! Introductory textbooks are full of definitions of "religion." It is not true that religion is difficult to define or can't be defined; if anything, it's too easy to define. Why this particular confusion persists is an important matter, and I'll elaborate more on it below.

At this point it is worth recalling Max Weber's famous claim that he could not define "religion" until after he had completed his research on religion. The problem with this, of course, is the following: if he hadn't determined in advance what counted as a "religion," how did he know what to research? How did he know he was researching "religion," and not airlines, eco-systems, or hot dogs? He must have been utilizing some particular use of "religion," if not an explicit definition. If he had not delimited anything as religion—if he had not sliced up a part of the world as something of interest—he would have had nothing to research.

The problem here seems to involve a conflation of definition and description. It might be hard to describe me, and, if you have just met me, you might want to hold off on describing me until you know me better. Perhaps this is something like what Weber meant when he said that he could not "define" religion until after he had studied it. However, although you might have a tough time describing me until you got to know me better (perhaps I am hard to get to know), presumably this is a question of description and not definition—you have already largely delimited or defined in advance what is "Craig Martin" and what is not. There must be some sort of taxonomy at work: I'm this person, not Erica Martin, not Butch Martin, and not Sandy Martin. The task of describing me can only begin after I have been defined or delimited or cut out as somehow separate (at least bodily) from these family

members. If one has not delimited in advance what counts as “Craig Martin,” one will not be able to offer any description, adequate or not, of “Craig Martin.” And, let me reiterate, it makes no sense to say that the definition of “Craig Martin” is adequate or inadequate—“Craig Martin” does not exist as such prior to some such delimitation.

II. Defining Religion

Consider the following things one might find in the world, which the word religion might or might not pick up:

Judaism	Indigenous Cultures	Feng Shui
Christianity	Practice of Yoga	Visiting a Medium
Islam	Personal Meditation	Marxism or Existentialism
Hinduism	Reading Self-Help Books	The Metallica Fan Club
Buddhism	Reading Astrology Reports	American Nationalism

Which of these things would be picked up by the colloquial use of the word religion (by “colloquial” I mean typical uses of the term religion in American English at the beginning of the twenty-first century)? I think most people would generally agree that the colloquial use of the term “religion” would probably pick up all of the things in the first column (with a small question mark next to Buddhism for all of those people who say it is a philosophy and not a religion). From the second column, the term might pick up indigenous cultures or the practice of yoga (another couple of small question marks), but probably not the other things. I think most would agree that colloquial uses of the term religion do not pick up anything in the third column.

The question I want to pose at this point is the following: can we find an explicit definition of religion that will pick up exactly the same things as the colloquial use? Do particular definitions pick up more or less than the colloquial use? Here I evaluate a few common definitions.

- *Religion as a “belief system.”* This definition picks up both more and less than the colloquial use. It will probably pick up Marxism or Existentialism, for example. In addition, the Metallica fan club may well be organized around the belief that Metallica is the best band there ever was. However, some Jewish and Buddhist practitioners specifically emphasize that one’s practice (ritual or meditative) is all that is important to them, and that one’s beliefs are irrelevant for membership in their community.

This definition would probably not pick up those particular forms of Judaism and Buddhism.

- *Religion as something that specifically concerns “supernatural” matters.* This definition will also pick up more and less than the colloquial use. Insofar as some forms of Christianity and Buddhism are atheist, this sort of definition would not grab those forms, although the colloquial use probably would. Also, this term might pick up astrology, feng shui, or visiting a medium, some uses of ouija boards, etc., although the colloquial use probably would not.
- *Religion as “matters of faith.”* This sort of definition often trades on the association of “religion” with “faith” and the association of “science” with “reason.” However, if we understand “faith” to be “faith in things that cannot be proven,” then one will find “faith” in elements of all of the things on the list. It cannot be “proven” that Metallica is the best band ever, nor can the nationalist faith in America be “rationally” justified. At the same time, if we understand “reason” to concern “things that can be proven,” then one will also find “reason” in elements of all of the things on the list. It seems “reasonable” to claim that a guy named Gautama preached about *dukkha* a few centuries BCE, to claim that a guy named Jesus lived, preached, and developed some sort of following in the first century, to claim that Metallica is a heavy metal rock band, or to claim that the fourth of July celebrates the day on which the Declaration of Independence was signed. These things are part of Buddhism, Christianity, the Metallica fan club, and American nationalism, but they are not simply matters of faith; they are facts. There are both matters of “faith” and matters of “reason” in every cultural tradition; the faith/reason binary will not neatly segregate those traditions colloquially called religions from other traditions.
- *Religion as concerning “the meaning of life.”* I am very uncomfortable with this definition because concerns about the so-called “meaning of life” are rather recent and bourgeois. Ancient Jews and first-century Christians, for instance, didn’t talk about the “meaning of life,” and most poor people spend their lives searching more for the satisfaction of minimal needs than the “meaning of life.” This vocabulary is really one of recent coinage, and is used most often by those who have the leisure time to search for this sort of “meaning.” I do not think this definition would pick up much of anything prior to the twentieth century. However, we can take part of this idea, and transform it a bit; perhaps concerns about the “meaning of life” belong under the category of “concerns about one’s place in a cosmology.” This more general category will pick up all of the things the

colloquial use of the term religion does, and several more. One can find concerns about one's place in a cosmology in some forms of Yoga, self-help books, Marxism and Existentialism, and some forms of American nationalism (those forms that focused on manifest destiny, for instance).

- *Religion as concerning "spirituality" or "spiritual well-being."* What this will pick up will depend on what one means by "spiritual," a vague term easily abused on account of its vagueness. I tell my students that I won't let them use the term unless they can make it clear what specific use they are making of it. Nevertheless, if we let "spiritual" be used broadly, this definition of religion will probably pick up all of the things the colloquial use does, as well as Yoga, meditation, self-help books, and perhaps feng shui.
- *Religion as "communal institutions oriented around a set of beliefs, ritual practices, and ethical or social norms."* This definition will probably pick up all of the things the colloquial use does, but it will probably also pick up some forms of yoga (maybe not those forms that are simply exercise, but probably those that are communally practiced), Marxism, the Metallica fan club, and American nationalism. In fact, this definition is really broad, and would probably pick up a whole host of things not colloquially understood to be religious: karate centers, Oprah's book club, businesses that have an important corporate culture, the local university's department of Religious Studies, etc.

One might come a bit closer to the colloquial use by combining this last definition with some qualification about the importance of supernatural elements. However, such a definition would still pick up American nationalism, which often has a theistic inflection, and would still fail to pick up atheist forms of some traditions colloquially called religions. We can conclude that none of these definitions match the colloquial use exactly. Next I want to consider why this is important.

III. Monothetic and Polythetic Definitions

It is useful at this point to introduce a distinction between "monothetic" and "polythetic" definitions. Monothetic definitions provide a list of necessary and sufficient features or common properties that delimit something as part of a class. The word yellence has a monothetic definition: anything that that is both (1) yellow and (2) a fence counts as a yellence; anything that is not both yellow and a fence is not a yellence. All of the possible definitions of religion I evaluated in the previous section were monothetic definitions—they each

listed the elements that something would need to have to be counted as a religion.

Polythetic definitions, by contrast, do not enumerate a list of features or properties that delimit something as part of a class. There are at least three types of polythetic definitions of words relevant here. The first type of polythetic use of a word is one that provides key properties, but does not describe them as necessary and sufficient. For example, William P. Alston “defines” religion as having *some or most* of the following:

1. Belief in one or more supernatural beings.
2. A distinction between sacred and profane objects.
3. Ritual acts focused on those objects.
4. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the god(s).
5. Religious feelings (awe, mystery, etc.) that tend to be aroused by the sacred objects and during rituals.
6. Prayer and other communicative forms of conduct concerning the god(s).
7. A world view according adherents a significant place in the universe.
8. A more or less comprehensive organization of one’s life based on the world view.
9. A social organization bound together by (1)-(8) (Alston 1964: 88).

This would be a polythetic use of the term religion, because those things in the world that would be picked up by the word religion would not all have the same necessary and sufficient properties. One “religion” might fit 2 through 9, but not 1, and another “religion” might fit 1 through 3 and 5 through 9, but not 4.

The second type of polythetic use of a word is the “family resemblance” use described by Ludwig Wittgenstein. His famous example is the word “game.” “Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games.’ I mean board-games, card-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all” (Wittgenstein 1958: 31)? Although he concludes that there are no properties universally shared by those things we call games, “we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (32). He uses the phrase “family resemblance” to describe these sorts of similarities. There are, then, polythetic uses of terms that are tied together by “family resemblance.” Christianity might share some features with Hinduism, and Hinduism might share some features with Buddhism, and hence we might use the term “religion” to describe all three, although the features that link the first two may not be the same set of features shared by the last two.

A third type of polythetic use of a term, which I call the “grab-bag use,” is one that simply collects dissimilar things and puts them together. I might invent a grab-bag term to gather together a random set of things under one word. For instance, I could use the term “borks” to pick out all 1968 Chevrolet Camaros, anything with the color purple on it, all friendships in Scotland, and my copy of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. My dad’s 1968 Camaro would be a bork, some of the books on the bookshelf in my office would be borks (the purple ones), etc. These things don’t even have a family resemblance to one another. The only way one could learn how the word bork is used is to memorize its use. The example I use to illustrate this to my students is the use of the term “furniture.” I cannot find a set of necessary and sufficient properties that those things usually called “furniture” share, and many of those things called “furniture” don’t even have a family resemblance to one another. I think that the only way to figure out how this grab-bag term is used is to memorize the things it is applied to, most often facilitated by reprimands from parents given to children who wrongly apply the term to carpet, drapes, blenders, or potted plants.

We can conclude the following: the colloquial use of the term religion cannot be captured by monothetic definitions because it is a polythetic use. The present colloquial use of the term religion, I argue, is a grab-bag use. What properties or resemblances make Christianity and Hinduism “religions,” but not American nationalism? I can think of none. The fact that American nationalism is not included in the present colloquial use of the term religion, despite its similarities and resemblances to those traditions usually included, means that the colloquial use of the term religion is a grab-bag use that one must simply memorize. (An intellectual history of “religion” in Western thought, such as Tomoko Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions* [2005], can offer a genealogy that explains why some traditions and not others are picked up by the present colloquial use of the term “religion,” but this genealogy does not relieve the fact that the colloquial use is polythetic and not monothetic.)

To return to the point above, it does not make sense to say that religion cannot be defined—it is defined all the time. However, it makes perfect sense to suggest that monothetic definitions do not fit the colloquial use. Religion can be defined, but monothetic definitions do not pick up exactly what the colloquial use picks up. When my students tell me “religion can’t be defined,” what they are probably trying to do is come up with a monothetic definition that fits their prior use of the word “religion,” which is a colloquial use. If the colloquial use of the term religion is a grab-bag polythetic use, it is no wonder that they might conclude that this is an impossible task. However, the claim

that “we cannot find a monothetic definition of religion that fits our colloquial use” is *not* the same as “religion cannot be defined.”

Similarly, this explains what Max Weber might have been up to. Although he said that he could not define religion until after he had studied religions, perhaps what he would have said, if he had thought more carefully about it, was that he was going to study all of those traditions colloquially called religions, and that after he had done so, he was going to try to find a set of properties uniquely common to them all. However, as I have suggested, it would be impossible to *define* something altogether after one had studied it, for one would have no idea whether or not what one was studying was “religion.” To formulate a monothetic definition of religion by finding properties uniquely common to the things already delimited as religion is a different sort of task. Of course, if the colloquial use is not monothetic, this would be an impossible task.

I have simplified my discussion by suggesting there is “a” colloquial use. However, in fact, the use of the word religion has not only varied over time, but there is more than one contemporary colloquial use and contemporary uses function differently in different social contexts. The colloquial use in the sixteenth century was different from the colloquial use in the twenty-first century, and the way that the word religion is colloquially used in a twenty-first century Evangelical church is probably a little bit different than the colloquial use in service at a twenty-first century Zen center. In addition, the adjective “religious” and the adverb “religiously” have a much greater range of colloquial uses than does the term “religion.” For example, I think that few people would say that the Metallica fan club is a “religion” in the colloquial sense, but I do not think anyone would be confused if I said that someone followed the band “religiously.”

Where does this leave us? If we are operating with a grab-bag use of the term religion, it will be impossible to make any general claims about religion. It is necessary to recognize that polythetic definitions are not like scientific taxonomies. For example, in theory all of the species of frogs of the genus *Leptodactylus* have a specific set of properties or characteristics in common with one another—on the basis of those common properties one could justify a number of general claims about the different species within that genus. However, words with polythetic uses pick out things from the world that do not have commonly shared properties. If there are no common characteristics among those traditions colloquially called religions, it will be impossible to make relevant generalizations about them. Let me offer an alternate example: “female,” I would suggest, is a colloquial grab-bag term that groups together different things that have few if any universally shared properties. Consequently, there are few if any general claims to be made about “females.”

It is for this reason that there is no good general “theory of religion.” Lease suggests that this is a failure of the discipline, but I would argue the opposite. General theories make claims that begin with the following: “all religions . . .” If religion is a grab-bag term that groups different things with no common characteristics, then it would be inappropriate to make claims about “all religions,” just as it is inappropriate to make claims about “all females.” It is for this reason that I am suspicious when Lease suggests the following: “All religious systems . . .” (Lease 1994: 467). There can no more be a general theory of “religion” in the colloquial sense than there can be a general theory of “female” in the colloquial sense.

IV. Genealogies of “Religion” and the Critique of Reification

What I have argued to this point is guilty of being almost completely ahistorical. In order to go about Lease’s “history of consciousness” that would “trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as ‘religion’ while excluding others” (472) we would have to historicize particular uses of the word religion, rather than simply suggest that words are capable of variable uses. In addition, referring to “colloquial uses,” as if they were natural, tends to mask the extent to which contemporary colloquial uses of “religion” result in part from a long tradition of European imperialism and colonialism. Most contemporary colloquial uses tend to pick up Christianity and Buddhism but not American nationalism; this is not natural or arbitrary, but is the result of a long history.

In order to bring into relief this history of the use of the term, it would be necessary to do some sort of diachronic genealogical study of the use of the term religion in multiple historical contexts. It should be noted that the definition and use of “religion” is different in each context. Insofar as the definition or use of a term in another historical context is different from our own use, we are quite literally not talking about the same thing. It would not be correct to say that “people in the sixteenth century understood religion differently than we do today”; rather, we should say that “what the term ‘religion’ individuated in the sixteenth century, what it cut out from the world, was something different—we are not talking about the same thing when we say ‘religion.’” The former claim suggests that those from the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries understand the same thing differently. However, the latter claim notes what the first misses: if something different is individuated by an alternate use of the same term, then there is not the same “thing” to know.

I do not believe we should overemphasize this latter claim. Although I think it is right, despite the fact that what is individuated by the term might shift, the various uses of the term “religion” still tend to overlap one another—otherwise there would be no reason to use the same term. For instance, Ninian Smart uses the term “worldview” in place of the term “religion,” in order to pick up Marxism and various nationalisms in addition to those traditions colloquially called religious, although he could just as well have continued to use the term “religion” (Smart 2000). Previous uses of the term did not pick those things up, but Smart correctly recognizes that some forms of Marxism and nationalism bear a striking resemblance to and deserved to be studied alongside many of those traditions colloquially called religious. Although extending the grab-bag use of religion to include Marxism and nationalism would literally make religion something different than it was before, this use would clearly overlap prior uses.

A genealogical study could also demonstrate that there are different chains of associations connected to the word religion in different historical contexts. Whereas religion may be associated with social authority, social control, and ideology in some contemporary contexts, this set of associations is in part the product of early modern anti-clerical discourses and enlightenment discourses about rationality. It would be difficult to find these chains of associations in discourses on religion prior to the Protestant Reformation. Just as one can study the history of uses of the term religion, one can study the history of the chain of associations connected to it.

Last, a genealogical study could study the way in which the word religion has been an important social ordering principle for some societies. For instance, the words “public,” “private,” “religion,” and “state” do not just pick out something in the world, and neither do they simply have positive and negative associations. These terms actually serve to create and sustain social boundaries in the modern world. Foucault notes that using the word “planet” does not change the place of earth’s orbit, but the modern invention of the language of states changed human history (Foucault 2007: 276). He calls this a “reflexive event.” Similarly, Ian Hacking uses the phrase “looping effects” to describe the ways in which the categories humans use reshape their social world (Hacking 1999: 34).

These social constructionist genealogies of the word religion are beneficial insofar as they subvert reification or hypostatization. It is difficult to take for granted an essentialist view of “religion” when faced with a history of its variability. Lease follows Peter Berger (e.g., Berger 1990) in suggesting that cultures invent and use categories to order their world, but then “externalize” those categories as if they were part of the world itself rather than their own

inventions. “Confusion and misunderstanding inevitably result when such models are objectified as reality” (Lease 1994: 458). Or, to put it in Hacking’s terms, the “looping effects” of language on the world and vice versa are made invisible. Lease situates himself in the Marxist tradition that finds such objectified ideology to be more constraining than liberating. “These fabrications provide straightjackets into which people should/must place their lives: they enslave” (474)! A history of these fabrications would trace “the various differentiations allowed and achieved among all the self-evidences established, discarded and recovered” (458). Once these apparently natural and eternal categories are revealed to be invented, they are presumably capable of reinvention.

V. “There Is No Religion”?

What sense, then, can we give to the claim that there is no religion? If my assumptions outlined above are correct, there is no religion in the sense of a Platonic form or ahistorical essence. If we abstract from specific uses of the word religion in particular contexts, there is no such thing as religion. When Lease claims that “There cannot be a ‘history of religion’ for the simple reason that there is no religion” (472), this makes perfect sense if he means a history of “religion in itself.” Lease goes on to claim that a history of religion “can only trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as ‘religion’ while excluding others” (472). While I think such a history would be interesting and valuable, it is certainly not the only way in which one could do a history of religion. It is here that I believe Lease falls into one of several traps many social constructionists fall into.

The error I think Lease makes (if I understand him right) is something like the following: “if social constructionism is right, then there is no such thing as religion.” But this is certainly false. If social constructionism is right, then there is no such thing as religion in itself, because what counts as religion depends on what specific use one is making of the word religion. However, that means that there is religion given a specific use of the word. If one chooses to use the word religion to pick out of the world “talk about gods” (a definition that is, admittedly, not the same as most colloquial uses), one could do a history of religion—such a history would cover different ways that humans have talked about gods. Therefore it would not be true that the history of religion would necessarily be restricted to a genealogical investigation of variable uses of the word.

This brings me to a second error that some social constructionists fall into: “because religion is a word that is indigenous to our culture, we cannot/should

not apply it to other cultures.” Some scholars have made much of the fact that there is no word analogous to the word religion in Ancient Greece. Does that mean all talk of “Ancient Greek religion” is nonsense? The best answer is “no.” We can use the term religion to pick up things in the world; perhaps we will use it to pick up “talk about gods.” If we use it in this way, the term religion will pick up some stuff from Ancient Greece. Ancient Greeks did not use a conceptual scheme in which the term “H₂O” made any sense, but that does not mean that there was no H₂O in Ancient Greece, as we now use the term. There is nothing intrinsically objectionable to using a second-order conceptual scheme to describe things in a historical context that did not use the same conceptual scheme.³ However, it is necessary to add, we must beware of generalizations and chains of associations. We cannot make generalizations about Ancient Greek talk about gods and goddesses, as if such talk were identical to contemporary talk about gods and goddesses. In addition, we cannot assume the chain of associations presently hung on the term religion by some, such as “private,” “inner spirituality,” or “essentially about good morality.” Last, since Ancient Greeks did not use the term “religion,” it could not have been a principle of social order or looping category for them, as it is for moderns, who do use it to order society (in part through its associations with “private” and “privacy”). On a particular use of the term “religion,” we might be able to find “religion” in Ancient Greece, but it would be terribly anachronistic to find “separation of religion from the state” as an ordering principle of the polis.

A third error that some social constructionists make goes something like this: “because the word religion was used by Westerners in ways that supported colonization, its use is forever biased and should be abandoned.” As Edward Said famously demonstrated, the modern distinction between “the East” and “the West” was coded in a way that served the interests of those identified as a part of “the West” (Said 1979). Similarly, what is individuated as “religious” or “not religious” has in the past served the interests of some at the expense of others. Is its contemporary use so informed by the history of European imperialism and colonialism to make it invariably biased? I do not think that this is a necessary conclusion. This sort of claim starts in a social constructionist manner—“in this context, religion was constructed as this or that, with these associations, and in ways that served the interests of this group of people”—and ends up suggesting the opposite of the social constructionist position, insofar as it concludes by implying that the use of the word is eternal and invariable—as if all uses of the word religion serve the interests of Europeans. But words do not have an eternal and unchanging use. Terms that serve

³ Bruce Lincoln makes a similar argument; see Lincoln 2007: 167.

a particular set of interests in one context may be coordinated with a different set of interests in another context.

This error is a type of genetic fallacy—those who make this sort of claim seem to believe that the explanation of the origin of a cultural artifact is sufficient to explain all subsequent uses. However, understanding why the *Bhagavad-Gita* was written will not in itself shed much light on Gandhi's use of it. Understanding why the Qur'an was written will not in itself shed much light on Sayyid Qutb's use of it. Understanding Hegel's corpus will be insufficient for understanding how Judith Butler utilizes his work. Similarly, understanding the original modern European use of the word religion will be insufficient for understanding all subsequent uses. For example, in a recent article Richard King states:

The modern concept of "religion" carries with it certain key assumptions about the world that are, as we shall see, ultimately grounded in a hegemonic Euro-American myth about the origins of 'modernity' and the birth of the secular nation-state. These assumptions are not ideologically neutral but rather are encoded according to a specifically European history of the world (King 2006: 235).

The first problem with this statement is that it begins with the word "the," which suggests that there was only one concept of "religion" produced in the modern period. The second problem is that it suggests that the word religion always "carries with it certain key assumptions about the world." Contrary to King's claims, there are multiple uses of the word "religion," and multiple ways in which the word is coded. Some uses carry assumptions about European superiority, but other uses carry assumptions about the inherent purity of indigenous religions, assumptions about the superiority of "faith" and "religion" over cold, heartless, valueless "science," or assumptions about the superiority of "individual spirituality" over "institutional religion." I am not necessarily supporting the interests of modern European nations every time I say the word "religion." Analyses of the word religion should be sensitive to specific contexts; we should not project the use of the word in one context onto all other contexts.

VI. Tracing Displacement

There is much to praise about the legacy of social constructionist scholarship. Since the early nineties there have appeared a number of valuable genealogical studies of the use of the word religion and its social effects, histories that "trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as 'religion.'" However, there are many criticisms one could make beyond the cri-

tique of “reification.” I argue that this body of research can be improved if the social constructionist genealogies are supplemented by a focus on other rhetorical maneuvers. What the social constructionist emphasis on reification misses is the fact that within a single context multiple and contradictory taxonomies and chains of associations can be at work in a way that fundamentally enables a number of rhetorical shell games to take place.

I think the most important of these shell games is the process of ideological or rhetorical displacement, whereby “a term customarily used to refer to one object or individual is used to refer to another, and thereby the positive or negative connotations of the term are transferred to the other object or individual” (Thompson 1990: 62). Displacement involves a rhetorical “bait-and-switch”—one begins by describing one thing, attaching a chain of positive or negative associations, and then swapping that thing for another thing. Although it is logically inaccurate to make general claims about “all religions” or “all females,” the process of displacement allows one to do so. One can describe a particular female, or a particular group of females, and then displace what one has said about them onto all who are colloquially called females. What is going on here is not reification but displacement. Similarly, one could describe Al-Qaeda and then displace the negative associations created onto all traditions colloquially called religious. This is a convenient rhetorical move for those favoring a “separation of religion from the state.” However, those who support the influence of religious traditions on the state can use the same rhetorical move, but displace a set of positive connotations instead—for them the positive associations connected to Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. can be displaced onto all traditions colloquially called religions. In the recent spate of popular atheist writings, the term “religion” is used with many negative connotations, so much so that the adjective “religious” is practically an insult or a slur. In other settings, “religion” has generally positive associations; the word “religion” sometimes conjure up the following associations: “love,” “health,” “happiness,” “well-being,” “salvation,” “peace,” etc.

One of the most dangerous forms of displacement happens in liberal political discourses. Liberal political theorists often defend a “separation of church and state” by setting up a chain of associations that displaces the adjectives “private,” “apolitical,” and “spiritual” onto all of those traditions colloquially called religions. The problem with this way of thinking is that it renders invisible and inconsequential the fact that those institutions colloquially called religions are free to distribute ideology and socialize citizens in ways that have profound political effects.

Russell McCutcheon argues in the last two chapters of *The Discipline of Religion* (2003) that modern European rhetorical innovations delimited

religion as a private thing in a way that was designed to sequester it from the state. Thus the “public sphere” and the “private sphere” were brought into being, establishing the “separation of church and state.” Although this social order was externalized, objectified, or reified as natural or eternal, there was nothing natural about it. As Lease (following Berger) rightly suggests, it is a “fabrication” that segregates (or “straightjackets”) the world. Although it might be a fabrication that benefited modern Europe, it would be a mistake to take that way of ordering the world as self-evident. McCutcheon’s account demonstrates the looping effect or the reflexive event that took place when modern Europeans began using the word religion as a social ordering principle.

There is much that is right and much to be learned from this account (it has been the starting point for much of my own research), but I believe that insofar as it narrowly focuses on the critique of reification it misses the rhetorical displacement that masks the indirect political effects produced by those institutions called religions. There is nothing particularly “apolitical” or “private” about contemporary American Evangelical Christianity, although the rhetorical displacement carried out by liberalism’s public/private language makes it difficult to think about this in a sophisticated manner. Here the critique of displacement can enrich and strengthen the social constructionist critique of reification.

VII. Conclusion

Lease ends his essay on an optimistic note. Although there are a number of strategies capable of maintaining the paradoxes that result from the reification of those “fabrications” or “human constructions” that serve as “straightjackets” that “enslave” (1994: 474), Lease suggests that paradoxes ultimately and inevitably result in “breakdowns” (479). He believes they lead to their own dissolution.

By contrast, I find discourses marked by contradiction to be slippery and resilient. Rhetorical displacement is made possible by bait-and-switch tactics that are logically contradictory, yet displacement masks those very contradictions. In sum, contradictions and rhetorical displacement go hand-in-hand in a way that contributes to the maintenance of contradictions. Dominant parties are unlikely to seek to resolve contradictions in their discourses unless doing so serves their interests. For instance, contemporary American Evangelical institutions like “Focus on the Family” benefit from those liberal discourses that characterize their institutions as private and apolitical. Therefore it is no surprise that for the most part they fully support both “separation of

church and state” and “freedom of religion”: the rhetoric of “freedom of religion” gives them free reign to socialize citizens in ways that produce public effects that indirectly contradict the “separation of church and state,” while the latter rhetoric masks these effects.

Consequently, I have little faith that these paradoxes and contradictions will ultimately break down. If they do break down, it will be the result of the diligence of those who tirelessly pick at the almost invisible seams of dominant discourses. In *The Digging Leviathan*, James P. Blaylock writes, to “learn the truth [is] to make things fall apart. Knowledge [is not] a cement, a wall of order against chaos; it [is] an infinitude of little cracks, running in a thousand directions, threatening to crumble into fragments our firmest convictions” (Blaylock 1984: 96). We cannot wait for the seams in the straightjacket to unravel. Without the production of truths and knowledges that carefully attend to the reifications and displacements that patch over the seams in the dominant discourse, “our firmest convictions” may never break down.

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