

Religion and the Problem of Definition

Words and concepts have a history; their meanings, the terms with which they're associated, and the objects or referents they select from the world change over time. A trivial example: the word "thong" once was used to refer to what we today call a "flip flop," but the word now more commonly refers to a particular type of underwear. A more significant example: in ancient Israel, a "marriage" was a social relationship where girls beyond the age of puberty were given by their fathers to other men in exchange for a dowry. When a man raped an unmarried virgin, he was legally required to pay the father a fee and marry the woman, since she was, for all practical purposes, damaged property. A man could have as many wives as he wanted, although wives could only have one husband. Quite literally, the Bible says that men "marry" and women, by contrast, are "taken" or "lorded over." By contrast, in the middle of the twentieth century—at least in the United States—the word "marriage" referred to a mutually voluntary, legally certified relationship between one adult man and one adult woman. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the word has been changed to refer to voluntary, legally certified, relationships between two adults, of whatever gender or sex. If a community changes the use of a word, the objects (or types of relationships, in this case) to which the word points can be partly or even completely different. In addition, as is clear in the case of "marriage," the changes are contested and highly political. This is especially true of the word "religion," which has changed dramatically over the last several centuries. However, before looking at the complicated history of the word "religion," let's consider a very different politicized word.

Political Definitions: Wetlands

In *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (2003), Edward Schiappa provides an account of how the definition of the word "wetlands" changed in the United States during the early 1990s. At the time, conservationists who

wanted to protect wetlands were in competition with developers who wanted to build houses, strip malls, etc. on existing wetlands.

For the conservationists, the keys to defining a “wetland” were threefold. (1) The soil had to be sufficiently saturated with water such that (2) less oxygen could get into the soil, creating conditions in which (3) only certain types of plants adapted to soil with less oxygen—called “hydrophytes”—could thrive. Their definition was not random, and nor was it based on a simple description of patches of land that were sort of wet. On the contrary, the conservationists were concerned first with protecting those species of plants and animals that could only live in these types of wetlands. Second, wetlands—at least on this definition—absorb and hold sediments that we, as humans, don’t want in our drinking water, keeping the water table cleaner. Third, this sort of soil can also absorb excess water during heavy rainfall, thus protecting humans to some extent from possible floods. So the conservationists fabricated a definition of “wetland” precisely because they wanted to save certain plants and animals, improve drinking water, and protect us from floods. By contrast, developers had another sort of human interest: they wanted to make money by building on the properties designated and protected as “wetlands.”

When George H.W. Bush was running for president of the United States in 1992, “wetlands” were a crucial political issue, and Bush needed to earn the votes of those citizens sympathetic to the conservationists. Consequently, one of his central campaign promises was that under his presidency he would ensure that no wetlands would be lost to development. However, at the same time he also wanted to please the developers so as to continue to get their support—developers can donate more campaign money than conservationists. When Bush finally came into office, he signed into existence legislation that protected “wetlands,” but the legislation *completely changed the definition of wetlands* in ways designed to serve the interests of the developers. Specifically, the legislation said that wetlands had to be *very wet*, not just below the surface of the soil, but also at the surface. Bush said, “I’ve got a radical view of wetlands. I think wetlands ought to be wet” (Schiappa 2003, 87). This benefitted the developers because it greatly reduced the number of “wetlands,” as, based on the definition of the conservationists, not all of the “wetlands” were really wet or had water on the surface.

Estimates suggested that probably 30 to 50 million acres of land that had been “wetlands” on the conservationists’ definition were reclassified as “not wetlands”—reducing the number of wetlands by a third or by half—so that the developers could build houses and strip malls. A great deal of money was made, and Bush could claim he kept his campaign promise: he *did* in fact approve legislation that protected the “wetlands,” even as he redefined the term to suit his purposes. It was a successful bait-and-switch.

The conservationists, of course, were unhappy with these results, insofar as the “really wet” wetlands were so different from the “wetlands” they had singled

out that the new legislation no longer served their interests. “Really wet” wetlands couldn’t absorb sediments dangerous to human drinking water in the same way, couldn’t absorb floodwaters, and didn’t sustain the types of endangered species that thrived in the type of “wetlands” that fit their definition. On the new definition, all of the desires of the conservationists were thwarted.

For Schiappa, what is interesting about this case is that both definitions of “wetlands” are tied to human interests, just different sets of interests. What is a wetland? The answer to that question depends on whether one wants a clean water table and to avoid floods, or if one wants to build a suburb. Note: we cannot simply answer that question by going out and looking at one. Whether a particular patch of land is a “wetland” depends not on whether it is wet—just looking at it won’t help us. The very same patch of land might look like a wetland for the conservationists but not for Bush and the developers.

Another crucial point for Schiappa is that these definitional decisions are always related to political power, which is why they’re so contested. At the end of the day, what is crucial is the legal definition *enforced by the state*. Conservationists can define “wetlands” differently all they want, but their definition has no real-world consequences as long as the state is endorsing and enforcing another definition.

Schiappa concludes that abstract questions like “what is a wetland?”—especially when considered outside of any social or political context—are generally useless. Rather, “the questions to ask are ‘Whose interests are being served by this particular definition?’ and ‘Do we identify with those interests?’” (82)? Do we want to make money or save houses from floods?

Political Definitions: Religion

“Religion” is a lot like “wetland”: how the term is defined, as well as what’s included or excluded in the definition, depends on the interests of those making up the definition. Consider, for instance, two legal cases about whether “yoga” falls under the definition of “religion.”

The state of Missouri began taxing yoga studios in 2009, treating them the same as any other business—like gyms—that provides such services. The owners and operators of yoga studios immediately objected to the policy. They insisted that yoga was religious, or spiritual, and as such should be tax exempt, just like churches and other “religious” institutions. “Yoga is a spiritual practice. It’s not a purchase. . . . Somehow, we need to get the state to realize that” (Huffstutter 2009). Despite the fact that yoga is a highly profitable, \$6 billion industry (Huffstutter 2009), yoga enthusiasts were successful in getting the state of Missouri to change the policy.

By contrast, consider another case from California in 2013. Following the recommendation of yoga enthusiasts, yoga began to be taught in physical

education courses in public schools. Soon thereafter, two conservative Christian parents who were uncomfortable with their children being taught yoga filed a lawsuit alleging that, insofar as yoga is “religious,” teaching it in public schools violated the separation of church and state. According to the parents’ lawyer, “If yoga is a religion and has religious aspects, it doesn’t belong in the public schools” (Graham 2013). The lawsuit failed, and the judge ruled—in favor of the yoga instructors—that the yoga was not religious.

So, is yoga religious? If we follow Schiappa’s lead, this is an unhelpful question to ask. Instead, let us ask: according to whom and in what social context is yoga religious? What are the interests of the various parties involved? Yoga enthusiasts in Missouri defined yoga as *religious*, because they didn’t want to pay taxes to the state. Yoga enthusiasts in California defined yoga as *not religious*, because they wanted to be able to teach it in the public schools. The definition of religion in this case turned on the interests of the parties involved—these definitional games are self-serving. Do we want to make money or get some exercise? Ask other yoga enthusiasts if yoga fits into their definition of “religion,” and we’re likely to get different answers depending on their individual social and political contexts. What is included and excluded from the definition of religion varies, depending on the politics of the definers. Thus, rather than ask ourselves “What is religion?,” it would be better to ask, “Why does this group define religion this way rather than that way, what do they hope to accomplish, and how does the definition serve their interests?” As with wetlands, what do we want to put into our definition, and why? What do we want to protect, or what do we want to sell?

Defining Religion: A Brief Historical Survey

Today people often think of “religions” as special cultural traditions organized around the belief in a god, as well as a set of rituals and communal practices related to that belief. It is often assumed that religion is a matter of individual, personal choice, and a private matter that ought to be kept separate from politics. This contemporary use of the word “religion” has a long history, starting with early modern European politics. There is, in fact, no equivalent word for the modern term “religion” prior to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. For reasons we’ll discuss below, it was not until the Reformation that people began to characterize “religious” institutions as private, separate from politics, and related to spiritual rather than material or bodily concerns.

“Religion” before Modernity

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the worship of gods was not seen as a special part of life fundamentally segregated from politics or other social spheres.

For instance, in ancient Rome many emperors were worshipped as divine, and people made sacrifices to gods in the hopes that the gods would protect their health, their wealth, or their businesses. Similarly, the Bible presents the kings of ancient Israel as appointed by God; the king's duty was to implement the divine law given to Moses—including, for example, the Ten Commandments. In ancient Greece, ancient Rome, or ancient Israel, a distinction between “religion” and “politics” would have been nonsensical.

If we look at modern English translations of premodern texts, we'll often find that translators do, however, use the word “religion” in their translations. For instance, in the Qur'an—written long before the Protestant Reformation—there is a passage that is typically translated in the following way: “I [Allah] have perfected religion for you” (Surah 5:3). If there is no premodern equivalent for the word “religion,” then what ancient Arabic word is being translated here? We could ask the same question about translations of ancient texts from many premodern languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, etc. If there is no premodern word for religion, what are these translators translating? As J.Z. Smith once said in an interview, “It's a well-known conundrum: nobody else has a word remotely like that. If you really want to falsify a translation, find the word religion in any other language” (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTVeX4Jp418>). Translations are often deceptive.

In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (2013), Brent Nongbri looks at many of these instances of problematic translation. He finds that the Latin word *religio* is often translated as “religion,” but in ancient Rome the word *religio* did *not* mean a private institution, separate from politics, which prepared one for the afterlife. On the contrary, the word meant something like “scruples,” “devotion,” “reverence,” or “rules.” Of course, this use overlaps a little bit with some modern uses of “religion,” but only slightly. In ancient Rome, one could have *religio* or scruples with respect to any kind of life circumstance—obeying the law could constitute *religio*. *Religiones* were not “religions” but, rather, any set of “rules or prohibitions instituted *either by gods or by humans*” (emphasis added; 28). Similarly, the Arabic word in the Qur'an often translated as “religion” is *dīn*, which simply meant “custom” or “law.” Thus, “I have perfected religion for you” is a misleading translation; a translation closer to the Arabic would be “I have perfected the law for you.” Nongbri demonstrates the same with many other premodern words that continue to be poorly translated. When we translate premodern terms as “religion,” we are actually projecting our own, contemporary ideas back into the past. The scholarly term for this is “anachronism”; an anachronism is something that is out of place in history (for instance, talking about automobiles in ancient Greece would be anachronistic, since automobiles were not invented until much later in human history). Translations that find “religion” in premodern texts are anachronistic, and we must guard against making such errors.

“Religion” in the Early Modern Era

How did “religion” come to be seen as a special kind of institution or culture, fundamentally separate from other forms of culture or politics in general? Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic church was involved in the political affairs of all Western European states. After the Protestant Reformation—when Protestant churches began to secede from the Catholic church—some European kings sided with the Catholics, and others sided with the Protestants. Those kings who had allied with the Catholic church attempted to suppress the growing Protestant movement, as they saw Protestantism as a threat to the unity of their state. Many people were killed, and several wars ensued.

The Protestants responded to the violence and attempts at suppression by claiming that their institutions should be tolerated, as they were not, in fact, a threat to political unity (although the fact that they were literally warring with the Catholics made this a bit of a disingenuous argument). Martin Luther—the initiator of the Protestant Reformation—argued that states and churches had completely separate jurisdictions. The duty of a king was to oversee bodies and the welfare of the nation; the duty of ministers was to oversee the preparation of souls for the afterlife. In an important treatise on the essential differences between religious institutions and state institutions, Luther wrote that the state is supposed to oversee “laws that extend no further than the body, goods and outward, earthly matters” (Luther 1991, 23). Since the jurisdiction of churches did not overlap or interfere with the jurisdiction of the state on Luther’s account, the state should tolerate minority religious groups whose affairs were indifferent to “earthly matters” (see Martin 2010 for a summary and critique of these arguments).

This was a very radical view at the time: the Catholics certainly understood the duty of the church as concerning *both* this world and the next. However, the Protestants were eventually successful in earning the right to be tolerated, largely because, at some point, ongoing war between Catholics and Protestants became a losing situation for all parties. Tolerance of hated enemies became preferable to perpetual fighting. In this instance, defining religion as a cultural sphere separate from politics and law first served the interests of the Protestants, protecting them from Catholic oppression, and eventually served the interests of everyone who wanted to avoid the wars over these competing political allegiances.

The philosopher John Locke wrote what is probably the most famous defense of religious tolerance. The basis of his argument was, as with Luther, jurisdictional:

The care of the souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind . . . And such is

the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torment, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgment that they have framed of things.

(Locke 2003, 219)

The latter claim is, of course, clearly false: governments persuade people to “believe” things all the time through mandatory state education, propaganda campaigns, outlawing competing views, etc. Nevertheless, making the distinction between persuasion and force led him to the following conclusion:

The church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these societies, which are, in their original, end, business, and everything, perfectly distinct, and infinitely different from each other.

(226)

This too was false; Locke was making an argument in favor of tolerance *precisely because* states were mixed up in the business of the churches. However, it was a useful lie: insofar as the claim was received as persuasive, the assertion that states and churches don’t have anything to do with one another—even though they obviously did—was a way to get states to *stop* interfering with churches. (Notably, Locke allowed for several exceptions to his rule; he thought that some “religions,” like Islam, were such a threat to the commonwealth that the state should obviously outlaw and repress them (see Martin 2010)).

What is crucial here is that—much like “wetlands”—this jurisdictional definition was a new invention; before this time no such “religion-as-a-private-matter” was thought to exist. Just like George H.W. Bush or our enterprising yoga instructors, Martin Luther and others invented a new definition in order to serve their unique political interests.

Notably, however, even though tolerance was won with the argument that the jurisdiction of churches did not overlap with the jurisdiction of the nation, it is clear that churches—both Catholic and Protestant—continued to involve themselves in social and political matters. The idea that “religions” were private matters was a useful fiction to end wars, but by no means did it change the churches’ behavior or end their involvement in political matters. This is unchanged still today: institutions we presently call “religions” continue to be involved in social and political matters, and vice versa. Indeed, the stereotypes that “religion makes people moral” or “religion can help make the world a better place” presume that the jurisdiction of “religion” concerns social welfare and thus overlaps with the jurisdiction of the nation-state.

"Religion," Colonialism, and Cultural Chauvinism

The only "religions" of particular concern in the definitional disputes of the sixteenth century were Catholicism and Protestantism. However, in the seventeenth century Christian Europeans begin to consider other cultural traditions as potentially deserving the status of "religions." At the time, their concern was primarily to separate out the definition of "true religion" from "false religion," and thus books on "religions" tended to focus on distinguishing the merits of "true religion"—that is, Christianity—from the errors of "false religions," such as Judaism or Islam, as well as what they called "idolatry," "paganism," or "heathenism." In the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europeans (and later, North Americans) developed an evolutionary schema, according to which they defined religions and cultures as entities that evolved over time from worse to better. Thus they separated the "backwards" religions like those of "primitive savages" from the "advanced" religions like Christianity and Judaism; these accounts put "Christianity" at the peak, as the most advanced—and therefore the best—religion among all the others. In his devastating critique of theories of "primitive religion," E.E. Evans-Pritchard writes,

[i]n these theories it was assumed, taken for granted, that we [Europeans] were at one end of the scale of human progress and that so-called savages were at the other end, and that, because primitive men were on a rather low technological level, their thought and custom must in all respects be the antithesis of ours. We are rational, primitive peoples prelogical, living in a world of dreams and make-believe, of mystery and awe. . . .

Primitive man was thus represented as childish, crude, prodigal, and comparable to animals and imbeciles.

(Evans-Pritchard 1965, 105)

Evans-Pritchard concludes that

[a]ll this fitted very well with colonialist and other interests, and some were prepared to admit that some of the discredit must go to the American ethnologists who wanted an excuse for slavery, and some also to those who desired to find a missing link between men and monkeys.

(106)

In summary, presenting "primitives" as evolutionarily backward was useful for justifying colonialism and slavery. *Their definitions and caricatures of "religion" were blatantly acts of cultural chauvinism.* These theorists found "in primitive religion a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect" (15).

Although his work did not directly support colonialism, Christian theologian Rudolf Otto defined “religion” as a sensing or feeling of “the Holy.” On the surface that doesn’t sound particularly chauvinistic, but when we look into the details, we find that his definition was designed to present Christianity—and, more specifically, Protestant Christianity—as the most “rational” religion and “unsurpassable” (Otto 1958, 82). For Otto, Christians sensed or felt “the Holy” and put that feeling into rational terms better than any other religion. By contrast, Otto argued that Judaism and Islam were slightly less rational, and, in the case of Islam, more “fanatical” (91). Otto viewed the “barbaric” (130) religions of “primitive savages” as so far behind in the progress of evolution and so “rudimentary” (117) that they shouldn’t be considered “religions” so much as “pre-religions” (124). For Otto, the definition of the word “religion” was useful not for an objective account of how “religions” are different from other cultural traditions; rather, it was a tool for ranking cultures and putting his favorite at the top. Otto too was reinventing the definition of words to serve his interests, thereby presenting his culture as superior to all other cultures.

Scholars have long noted the connections between these types of definitions of “religion” and European colonialism. Starting in the fifteenth century, European nations developed and expanded their empires by sending ships all over the world to conquer territory, seizing foreign land as their own, and appropriating natural resources for sale or trade. The ideology of the “white man’s burden” was used to justify colonization; that is, the so-called “more evolved” races had a moral duty to help the more “primitive” races catch up in the march of progress. Similarly, the view that there are advanced and primitive religions taught that it was acceptable to conquer and subjugate “backwards” religious groups in order to help them “evolve.” It is therefore no surprise that one of the early definers of “religion,” Samuel Purchas, defended the East India Company’s administration of the British colonial endeavors in India—the British invasion of India was seen as being for the greater good, insofar as it modernized trade and brought Christian missionaries to the region (see Fitzgerald 2007). Of course there is always a great deal of “collateral damage” in colonization; countless natives across the globe were killed as European nations expanded their empires. Quite literally, as Evans-Pritchard put it, definitions can be deadly weapons of war. These early definitions of “religion” and the ranking of cultures they entailed were chauvinist and imperialist in nature, justifications for colonizing whatever areas of the globe the Europeans saw as profitable.

The Christian Ideal

Most scholars of religion have moved away from this explicitly ethnocentric, Christian perspective. Many scholarly definitions leave out the ranking aspects of the earlier definitions, and instead define “religion” more neutrally as

including the religion of Christianity and other forms of culture that are structurally similar—usually Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, among others. However, some scholars argue that one problem of this more neutral approach is that we’re still left setting up “Christianity” as an ideal against which all other religions are compared. Even if scholars no longer accept that Christianity is somehow intrinsically superior to other religions, we may still be setting it up as a universal standard. On this type of definition, religions:

- 1 are started by a founder—like Jesus;
- 2 have central beliefs and doctrines that practitioners must believe in—like the Christians’ Nicene Creed;
- 3 have sacred texts in which those core beliefs are recorded—like the Bible;
- 4 have rituals designed to reinforce remembrance of those doctrines—like the Eucharist; and
- 5 have communities of worshippers organized around the sacred texts, doctrines, and rituals—like the Christian church.

This definition of religion encourages comparisons between the Bible and the Qur’an as sacred texts, or comparisons between Jesus and Muhammad as founders, or between the Eucharist and Muslim rituals such as praying five times a day or traveling to Mecca. In a way this approach is less biased than the earlier attempts at definition, insofar as Christianity is considered *alongside* other religions, rather than above them.

Unfortunately, this approach still sets up Christianity as the *ideal type*, which has resulted in a kind of Christian privilege, especially when it comes to the history of legal cases related to “religious freedom”—particularly in the United States. For a long time, Native American practices weren’t protected by laws governing religious freedom because the Native Americans didn’t have sacred texts or churches like the Christians did. Indeed, at some points in the history of the United States, Native American practices were outright prohibited by law, in part because American Christians considered them demonic. As Suzanne Owen writes in *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality* (2008), “[i]n 1883, despite the First Amendment of the United States constitution that guarantees religious freedom, Henry Teller, Secretary of the Interior, developed laws prohibiting Native American ceremonial activity. Those who were caught disobeying were imprisoned” (30–31). To secure some of the freedoms that Christians enjoyed, Native Americans eventually had to present their culture as somehow fitting the mold of Christianity. Black Elk was one figure who made great efforts in this cultural battle by creating narratives that became the basis of a Native American “spirituality.” In order for the Lakota tribe to be seen as having “a ‘true’ religion not unlike Christianity . . . Black Elk . . . employed a Catholic framework to explain Lakota ceremonial traditions,” inventing both a “founder” of the religion and a set of seven

“sacraments” (43). To earn the rights that Christians already enjoyed, Black Elk and others had to manipulate and transform their cultural traditions until they looked like a “religion” that Christians could recognize as familiar.

Similarly, religious freedom laws protected Christian “conscientious objectors,” giving them the right not to kill in war, while for a long time “conscientious objectors” who weren’t part of a “religious” tradition that looked like Christianity weren’t protected. In one interesting court case, analyzed by Winifred Fallers Sullivan in *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, (2005) some Jews and Catholics in Florida lost a “religious freedom” lawsuit—the lawsuit concerned whether they could decorate cemetery graves with “religious” shrines—because the Protestant judge didn’t see the litigants’ “religion” as sufficiently “religious” to warrant legal protection; to him, their religion didn’t look enough like his religion to count. This is what happens when Protestant Christian views of their own tradition are set up as the norm or the ideal model for all other forms of culture potentially deserving of legal protection.

Irrational “Religion”

One major shift in the way scholars talk about “religion” took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when scholars increasingly began to define “religion” as essentially irrational in some way, as opposed to other forms of knowledge that were considered rational or scientific by contrast. Rather than seeing religions along a continuum from better to worse—or from civilized to barbaric or savage—these scholars presented “science” as civilized and defined all “religion” as backward, unscientific, or intrinsically misguided in some way. This approach holds on to the evolutionary schema like Otto’s discussed above, except that it puts “science” or “secular” forms of knowledge at the peak of evolution rather than “Christianity.” The problem with this approach is that there’s no clear way to demarcate “scientific” reasoning from so-called “religious” reasoning. Social scientific research shows us that all groups—whether labeled “religious” or “nonreligious”—appeal to authoritative figures or texts, have unquestioned background assumptions, show in-group bias for their own group’s views, etc. (see Chapter 5 for more on this). From the perspective of social science, all human groups behave in similar ways, and thus the presentation of “nonreligious” groups as more reasonable than “religious” groups looks a lot like the self-serving narratives written by those scholars who presented Christianity as the highest evolved religion.

Consider those who defined “Islam” as essentially irrational after the 9/11 attacks on New York in 2001. Al Qaeda’s attack killed almost 3,000 civilians and was publicly viewed as irrational and immoral. By contrast, the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the United States resulted in the deaths of 92,000 people, more than 26,000 of whom were civilians (see costsofwar.org, hosted by Brown University, for more information about the death tolls of

recent global conflicts). Despite the fact that *this resulted in almost 9 times the number of civilian deaths* as Al Qaeda's attack, almost no one views the invasion of Afghanistan as "irrational." As William Cavanaugh notes in his book on the myth that religions are intrinsically and irrationally violent, "revulsion toward killing and dying in the name of one's religion is one of the principle means by which we become convinced that killing and dying in the name of the nation-state is laudable and proper" (Cavanaugh 2009, 4–5). Defining religion as irrational is a convenient way to justify killing enemies we can successfully label as irrationally "religious." Once again, we have a situation where the contested terms are defined in ways that serve the interests of the definers.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that one of the legacies of the tradition of distinguishing and ranking advanced religion and primitive religion is that people make a distinction and ranking between individual religion and organized religion, or—which seems to be the same thing—between spirituality and religion. The stereotype is that while organized religion is oppressive and constraining of individuality, spirituality is more liberating in that it allows for individual creativity. What counts as "religion" and "spirituality" is, as before, tied to the interests of those using the terms. In practice, "organized religion" seems to refer to any "religious tradition" a group dislikes, and "spirituality" is any "religious tradition" a group likes (see Martin 2014, especially the chapter titled "Our 'Religion' of the Status Quo"). Ironically, there are organized communities of "spiritual" people who oppose "organized religion," and those communities have their own rules, social norms, and demands for conformity—just like all human groups. The claim that their group's ideology is "spirituality" rather than "organized religion" is in many ways little different from the chauvinistic rankings of the imperialists who saw fit to conquer indigenous communities who had only a "primitive religion"—the only difference is that the insulting caricatures of "primitive religion" are recycled and revised, and then used to malign "organized religion."

In summary, these are just some of the problems with the history of the word "religion":

- Although we talk about "religions" existing prior to the modern era, this is problematic because premodern civilizations did not have a word for "religion," nor did they see what we might call "religion" as distinct or separate from other forms of culture or society.
- Protestant reformers appealed for tolerance on the basis of the fact that "church" and "state" had completely different jurisdictions, thereby obscuring the fact that those institutions we call "religions" are always actively involved in social and political projects (and vice versa).

- Many accounts of the nature of “religion” were designed to justify the cultural superiority of Christian Europe and to justify imperialism and colonialism.
- Even when different “religions” are seen as equal rather than better or worse, Christianity often gets used as the ideal model for what “religion” looks like, thus resulting in a legal bias in favor of Christians when it comes to religious freedom court cases.
- Although scientific studies show that all human groups require conformity, show irrational bias, and discriminate against other groups, “religions” are often assumed to be more irrational or more violent—despite the fact that we have no evidence for that assumption.
- Some groups today claim to be “spiritual” and contrast themselves with “organized religions,” but in doing so repeat the rhetorical gestures of imperialist Europeans who separated “Christianity” from “primitive religion” in order to claim superiority for their own group and justify colonial endeavors.

All of these uses of the term “religion” and “spirituality” are normative, meaning that the definitions of the terms are tied to a set of subjective and often controversial evaluative norms or values. This is problematic from an academic perspective because the definitions of academic terms are not supposed to center around the subjective, normative assumption that one’s own group is superior to others’ groups. Academic standards prohibit scholars from merely cheerleading for their own favorite institutions, even when their cheers are disguised beneath clever definitional work. “Religion” is a term with perhaps too much normative baggage, as almost all uses from the early modern period to the present are tied up with assertions of cultural superiority. Can the word be saved?

Toward a Better Definition?

Would it be possible to come up with a definition of religion that avoids the biases that existed in previous uses of the term, or a definition that isn’t simply self-serving for the group using it? Some scholars have attempted just this—to come up with a definition of religion without normative baggage, or one that would be neutral or unbiased. The problem, however, is that we cannot formulate a non-normative definition—that is, a definition that isn’t tied to problematic or subjective social norms—that fits with the everyday colloquial use of the word. Usually when we try to formulate a definition, we look at all the different things that word is applied to and try to see what they have in common with each other—what’s the lowest common denominator among all of these things? For instance, we could look at lions and tigers and try to figure out what they each have in common with their own species that simultaneously

Table 1.1 Forms of culture potentially called religious

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

distinguishes them from the other species: those big cats we call tigers all have stripes, and those big cats we call lions have manes (at least when it comes to the males in the species). “Stripes” would go into our definition of tigers—since they all have that in common—and “manes” would go into our definition of lions. There would be more to it than this, but this would be a start.

However, this method of formulating a definition will not work when we come to all those things we commonly refer to as “religion,” because *there are no features that are uniquely common to all the traditions we typically call religions*. People have tried to make an official definition that fits our colloquial everyday use, but they inevitably fail. Consider the things in Table 1.1 that one might find in the world, and which the word religion might or might not group together.

Which of these things would be picked up by the word religion? I think most people would generally agree that the colloquial use of the term would probably group together 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 include indigenous cultures or the practice of yoga (another couple of small question marks), but probably not the other things. Colloquial uses of the term religion rarely, if ever, include anything in the third column.

Now look at the following definitions of religion; we can see that none of them will pick up the same thing that the colloquial use of the term picks up.

- *Religion as a “belief system.”* This definition includes 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 group together more and less than the colloquial use. Insofar as some forms of Christianity and Buddhism are atheist, this

sort of definition would not include those forms, although the colloquial use probably would. Also, this term might pick up astrology, feng shui, or visiting a medium, and some uses of Ouija boards, 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 man named Gautama preached about *dukkha* a few centuries BCE, to claim that a man 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 4th 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.”* 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.” This definition would not pick up much of anything prior to the twentieth century. However, we can take part of this idea, and transform it slightly; perhaps concerns about the “meaning of life” belong under the category of “concerns about one’s place in the universe.” 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 the universe 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 that is easily exploited on account of its vagueness. 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—which is close to some scholarly uses of the word—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 very 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 little closer to the colloquial use by combining the 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 fail to pick up atheist forms of some traditions colloquially called religions. *None of these definitions match the colloquial use exactly.*

The problem here is simple: the reason why we can’t formulate a definition that fits the colloquial use is because *the colloquial use groups together dissimilar things*. This is, of course, in part because of the long history of the term, where its application shifted over time depending on the interests of those using the term. Since the word was used in many competing ways, of course the term has come to refer to a lot of dissimilar things. All of those things we colloquially call “religions” simply do not share a set of core properties.

A radical consequence of recognizing this fact is that we will not be able to make any generalizations about those cultural traditions we call religions. It is easy to make generalizations about something that is used with precision: all “fish” live in water and breathe with gills. But a term like “sea creature” is broader than “fish,” and groups together a wider variety of things, many of them dissimilar. We could say that “all fish breathe with gills,” but we couldn’t say “all sea creatures breathe with gills,” because whales and dolphins do not. The word “religion” is much more like “sea creatures” than “fish”—a lot of different things are grouped together under the word religion—and that prevents us from making any substantial generalizations. Anyone who begins a sentence with the phrase “all religions . . .” is certainly saying something false. It is therefore incorrect to say that all religions are about private matters, belief, faith, the supernatural, spirituality, mystical experience, or anything else. Because the colloquial use of the word “religion” groups together so many dissimilar things, these generalizations are simply not true.

In addition, if the word “religion” groups together dissimilar things, there will not be anything that fundamentally distinguishes those things called

religions from other sorts of cultural traditions. Consider the “sea creatures” example. We might try to make an essential distinction—“sea creatures are fundamentally different from land animals because the former breathe with gills and the latter breathe with lungs”—but it will not work, since the characteristics of both groups overlap: some sea creatures do, in fact, breathe with lungs, like some of the land animals. The same problem is true with “religions”—they cannot be essentially distinguished from other cultural traditions.

For instance, what is it that fundamentally distinguishes “religion” from “nationalism”? One might say that “nationalism” is concerned with *politics* but “religion” is not, but that would be false: many of those traditions we call religious are extremely political. American evangelical Christians, for instance, are very politically active. One might say that nationalism concerns a *national territory*, but religions do not, but that would be false: some of those traditions we call religious are in fact linked to a territory or piece of land. Hindu nationalism is an important contemporary movement in India, and one that sees Hinduism as intrinsically linked to “Mother India” as a specific territory. One might say that nationalism doesn’t have any *supernatural elements*, but religions do, but that too would be false: many forms of nationalism have supernatural elements. For instance, Hindu nationalism has a number of supernatural elements, as does American nationalism—as evidenced by the slogan “In God We Trust” on US money, and the inclusion of “one nation, under God” in the US pledge of allegiance. And, even if we eliminated all of these references to God from American nationalism, we would still have mysterious, almost supernatural ideas like “unalienable rights” which, according to the American constitution, were given to us by God. In the end, it turns out that there aren’t really any fundamental differences between those things we colloquially call nationalisms and those things we colloquially call religions. There is no substantial reason to call the 4th of July a nationalist celebration as opposed to a religious one—the only reason why we call the 4th of July nationalist rather than religious is force of habit.

Before concluding, I would like to clarify what I am not arguing. I am not saying that religion can’t be defined. Just like a “wetland,” “religion” can be defined in lots of different ways, depending on whose interests we want to serve. However, what I am saying is *we can’t come up with a definition that fits all of the everyday uses of the term*. Of course conservationists can define “wetland” in a particular way; what they cannot do is define “wetland” in a way that fits the colloquial use, their usage, and the usage of George H.W. Bush at the same time—simply because the word is used in competing ways across different contexts. Similarly, we can define “religion” in a lot of different ways, but none of our definitions will simultaneously fit the colloquial use and the use of the word by folks like Martin Luther, *and* Rudolf Otto, *and* scientists who think religion is irrational—they’re using the word in competing or potentially even opposite ways, so there isn’t a lowest-common-denominator to be found.

Conclusion

The history of the word “religion” is tied up with normative interests, Reformation-era politics, Christian ethnocentrism, European imperialism, and more. In each of the historical cases considered, “religion” was defined in a way specifically to serve the interests of some groups at the expense of others. In addition, even if we attempt to set aside the problematic history of the definition of “religion,” our common, everyday use of the word “religion” is relatively sloppy, arbitrary, and unsophisticated. I’m sure that psychologists refer to some of their patients as “crazy” on occasion, but you wouldn’t find an entry for “crazy” in a psychology textbook, simply because it’s an unsophisticated term. Similarly, there is nothing particularly wrong with utilizing the word “religion” in everyday conversation; however, as scholars we must be aware of the normative baggage associated with the term, resist making generalizations, and avoid positing any fundamental distinctions between “religion” and other types of cultural traditions. “Religion” might be no more useful in an academic setting than “crazy” is in a psychology class.

In addition, it would presumably be more neutral for us, as scholars, to resist taking sides with some definitions over others. Rather than say “yoga is religious” or “yoga is not religious”—that is, rather than taking sides with those who want to dodge taxes or those who think it makes for great exercise—perhaps we should simply point out how the game of definition works. In his analysis, Schiappa did not say “this is what a wetland really is”; on the contrary, he merely noted how this definition serves these interests, and that definition serves other interests. Similarly, perhaps we—in our role as scholars—should avoid taking sides in contested political battles and instead confine ourselves to pointing out how the different definitions of “religion” serve different social or political interests in different contexts. Much like sportscasters who don’t take sides in their commentary, we as scholars could strive for less bias by limiting ourselves to analyzing how others play the game.

What follows in this book does not presume that any particular form of culture is fundamentally “religious” or “not religious.” Since all forms of culture tend to function in similar ways, making a distinction between “religious” and “not religious” does not appear to be particularly fruitful. Thus we will look at forms of culture commonly considered “religious,” but we will also draw analogies or make comparisons to forms of culture often considered “not religious.” Although this book is intended as an introduction to the critical study of religion, it could just as well have been called *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Culture*. What we say about so-called “religious” culture will be transferable to culture in general.

A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion

Second Edition

Craig Martin

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business.

© 2017 Craig Martin

The right of Craig Martin to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Martin, Craig, 1976– author.

Title: A critical introduction to the study of religion / Craig Martin.

Description: Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa Business, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016043235 | ISBN 9781138202245 (hbk) |
ISBN 9780415419932 (pbk) | ISBN 9781315474410 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Religion—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC BL41 .M344 2017 | DDC 200.71—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016043235>

ISBN: 978-1-138-20224-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-41993-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-47441-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Minion Pro
by Apex CoVantage, LLC