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Defining religion

Religious studies scholars might certainly be delighted to have a definition of religion that everyone could agree on, but no such definition has yet emerged. Among the reasons for this lack of agreement is the tendency for people to define religion too narrowly, often from the perspective of their own backgrounds and culture. Imagine, for instance, persons raised in predominantly Christian or Muslim cultures, who would certainly note clear signs of religious beliefs and activities around them. If they belonged to those religions themselves, they would, of course, be active participants in the features of those traditions. But even as religious “outsiders” living within those societies influenced by the religious culture of Christianity or Islam, they would probably observe communal gatherings for preaching or prayer, the presence of religious edifices such as churches or mosques, the periodic celebration of festivals and rituals such as Christmas or Ramadan, and the presence of religious specialists such as priests, ministers, or imams. Thus, if asked, they would certainly agree that there was such a thing as “religion,” and that it played a vital role in the lives of many of the people around them. However, when pressed to define just what religion is and what it entails, they would very likely provide explanations based on what they themselves believed or what they saw around them. So they might end up defining religion as requiring a belief in the one true god, in sin, in an afterlife, and so on. They might designate anything outside their own cultural tradition’s notions of religion as not religion at all, but misguided beliefs and superstitious practices, or apply other such negative labels. Alternately, if attempting to be more inclusive, they

might nevertheless define religion as a series of obligatory practices (such as praying regularly), with particular prohibitions (such as not eating certain foods, or refraining from certain acts such as murder or adultery), with particular beliefs (such as in a single high god, divinely revealed teachings, and in the concepts of judgment and punishment), and so on.

Although such descriptive definitions do encompass much of what is generally regarded as religion in many societies and cultures, they are still too narrow. For instance, they exclude aspects found in certain world religions that question the value of obligatory beliefs and practices entirely. So, while some religions promote an unquestioning faith in a particular set of teachings, in other traditions a healthy skepticism regarding religion is regarded as a vital element of being truly religious. This, for instance, is a crucial feature of Buddhist teachings, even though most Buddhists in actuality do adhere to an array of beliefs and practices. Indeed, not only among various religions, but even within the same tradition, one person's most deeply held religious convictions may be regarded by another as the height of delusion. Thus it has been challenging for scholars to agree on a definition that is sufficiently encompassing of humanity's wide variety of religious orientations.

The Christian theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) offered a broad definition of faith (or religion) as “being grasped by an ultimate concern.” While to a Christian this ultimate concern might center on issues such as redemption, salvation, and being close to God for eternity, for a Buddhist it might be the state of freedom from all illusions through the attainment of *nirvana*. The notion of “being grasped” conveys the sense of some greater force or power that takes hold of persons, providing them with a perspective on what they deem to be most valuable and meaningful in existence. It is that collection of thoughts, beliefs, and values, which most shapes the character of their lives, upon which they base their most important decisions, and for which they may even be willing to give up their lives. This, then, would seem to be an effectively broad definition of religion, but it too is not without its problems; most notably for some scholars is the fact that it is too broad. It certainly circumscribes a Muslim's concern with Allah and his message conveyed through Muhammad, or a Hindu's concern with the attainment of *moksha*, a liberation from the cycles of rebirth, both of which most people would agree are clearly religious concerns. However, it would also define a woman's preoccupation with the attainment of wealth or power, if it was her central value, as her religion, or man's concern with personal beauty or the well-being of his children, were these his greatest preoccupations, as his religion. And it would include under the rubric of religion such things as political ideologies, sports, or artistic practices to which certain people find themselves thoroughly committed, and even willing to kill or die for. Although we might speak of a person “following Marxism with religious zeal,” or say “money is his religion,” we do tend to make distinctions between religion and, say, politics or art, which might elicit similar behaviors but strike many of us as somehow different.

The challenge in finding a suitable definition thus also lies in pinpointing just what constitutes that difference. However, if one looks at the entire question of definition

anew, one notes that it is not really a concern for the average person, but is a concern for those of us who are engaged in the study of religion. On any given day, an individual may wake up, wash, adorn himself or herself, go to the temple, read from a religious scripture, sing a hymn, then go to work and try to earn money, avoid eating meat at lunch, play a game of football after work, attend a political rally, read a chapter of a detective novel, play electric guitar, say a prayer and go to bed. He or she is unlikely to be concerned with categorizing certain of these activities as religious, political, sportive, artistic, materialistic, and so on. Distinguishing between what is religious and what is not in those activities is more challenging than it might first appear. Even though one might be inclined to categorize this person's temple visit, hymn singing, or prayers as religious activities, the person's interior attitude during those activities may not have been grounded in a deeply felt "religious sentiment." They may have been acting out of habit, behaving in conformity with social expectations, and so on, while their real religious passion lay in the overlooked, seemingly non-religious acts, such as in personal hygiene, physical fitness, political activism, or musical composition. After all, the study of religion is not merely about what outwardly looks like or is simply designated as religion; it also attempts to explore the full terrain of what constitutes the religious impulse and character in human beings. A Christian may be acting out of far deeper rooted Christian sentiments when volunteering in a soup-kitchen than when attending a Sunday church service.

A defining feature of many religions, which separates them from other deeply absorbing and meaningful activities, is their concern with powers or agents that are regarded as mostly existing beyond the grasp of the five senses or instrumental apparatus. These spirits, gods, or energies are thus "super-natural," in that they transcend or are beyond the natural world. They are not merely unseen physical energies, such as certain frequencies of light or electro-magnetism, as studied by physicists. The religious individual conceives of reality as somehow larger than what is normally perceived or conventionally studied by the sciences. Furthermore, aspects of this larger-than-ordinary reality are often regarded as somehow set apart. Their special character is held to be sacred or holy, and thus to be approached or related to in appropriate ways that are generally differentiated from actions and attitudes appropriate for the non-sacred portions of reality. There are wide variations among people as to just what reality truly contains. For some it is populated with gods, angels, and demons. For others, these entities are precisely examples of the illusions that cloud one's perception of true reality. Equally varied are the features that groups regard as sacred or non-sacred (i.e. profane). An orthodox Jew or Muslim may consider it abhorrent to eat pork, while a Christian may enjoy eating a roast sucking pig on a religious holiday such as Christmas. Similarly, a particular piece of land may be regarded by certain believers as utterly sacred, a spot upon which a god was born or where a prophet received a visionary teaching. It is worth killing or dying for. To non-believers, it is just a piece of undesirable real estate.

However, the complexity inherent in defining religion adequately and satisfactorily is not ultimately a problem, even for scholars. It is common to most

branches of learning. We routinely use words for a wide assortment of notions quite effectively without having to define them. The concept of “religion” is not particularly different in this regard. How does one define music or art? What exactly is the boundary between nuclear chemistry and nuclear physics, anthropology and sociology, history and literature, geography and environmental science, or quantum physics and mathematics? Confronting the challenge to find a suitable definition is just one of the venues through which one may actually learn more about one’s object of study and one’s own frame of reference. To ponder the question “What is religion?” is to have already embarked upon its study.

Assorted definitions of religion

Ambrose Bierce in *The Devil’s Dictionary*: “Religion: a daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.”

Edie Brickell: “Religion is a smile on a dog.”

Clifford Geertz: “Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

William James: “Religion . . . shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.”

The Oxford English Dictionary (1971): “Religion: 1) Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this. 2) A particular system of faith and worship. 3) Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effect upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life. 4) Devotion to some principle; a strict fidelity or faithfulness; conscientiousness; pious affection or attachment.”

Paul Tillich: “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.”

Adequate definitions of religion?

The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith (1995), addresses the lack of agreement on an adequate definition of religion and attempts to provide such a definition after discussing shortcomings of various inadequate definitions (pp. 893–4):

An Adequate Definition: One may clarify the term religion by defining it as a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings. This definition moves away from defining religion as some special kind of experience or worldview. It emphasizes that religions are systems or structures consisting of specific kinds of beliefs and practices: beliefs and practices that are related to superhuman beings. Superhuman beings are beings who can do things ordinary mortals cannot do. They are known for their miraculous deeds and powers that set them apart from humans. They can be either male or female, or androgynous. They need not be gods or goddesses, but may take on the form of an ancestor who can affect lives. They may take the form of benevolent or malevolent spirits who cause good or harm to a person or community. Furthermore, the definition requires that such superhuman beings be specifically related to beliefs and practices, myths and rituals.

Defining religion as a system of beliefs and practices relative to superhuman beings excludes Nazism, Marxism, or secularism as religions. This definition also excludes varieties of nationalism and civil quasi-religious movements.

Other attempts

From *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Winston King's entry "Religion" in the first edition):

In summary, it may be said that almost every known culture involves the religious in the above sense of a depth dimension in cultural experiences at all levels—a push, whether ill-defined or conscious, toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behaviour are built around this depth dimension in a culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically recognizable form. Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture.

From the *Columbia Encyclopedia*:

Religion: a system of thought, feeling, and action that is shared by a group and that gives the members an object of devotion; a code of behavior by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions; and a frame of reference by which individuals may relate to their group and their universe. Usually, religion concerns itself with that which transcends the known, the natural, or the expected; it is an acknowledgment of the extraordinary, the mysterious, and the supernatural. The religious consciousness generally recognizes a transcendent, sacred order and elaborates a technique to deal with the inexplicable or unpredictable elements of human experience in the world or beyond it.

Religious education and religious studies

People are motivated to teach about or to study religion for various reasons. However, there is a significant difference between the approaches taken by the discipline of religious studies and what may be broadly termed religious education. To some extent the difference hinges on distinctions between subjective and objective approaches to the study of religion.

Religious education can take a variety of forms. It generally derives from within a particular religious tradition for the purpose of teaching adherents of that tradition more about it. It is a mostly subjective experience. So a young Muslim boy may attend a school or classes where he learns to recite the Islamic sacred scripture, the Qur'an, and learn about Islamic moral values. Similarly, a Jewish boy may attend classes to learn how to read from the Torah before his Bar Mitzvah, a rite which grants him special privileges within his religious community. Certain Hindu boys may learn to chant the Vedas in a traditional school specializing in these ancient religious techniques, and in Thailand a young man may spend several months living the life of a novice Buddhist monk. In all these examples, instruction in the religion is often provided by an adherent of or specialist in that religion, such as a Muslim imam, a Jewish rabbi, a Hindu guru, or a Buddhist *bhikkhu*. Apart from dealing with the questions that derive from the curiosity, intrinsic skepticism, or doubt of the student, the teachers' task is to impart their religious tradition to their students in order to inculcate them more deeply into their own faith. It is education by believers for believers, with the purpose of solidifying in both teacher and student a foundation of understanding about their own religion.

Since belonging to a religious tradition has both inclusive and exclusive features, in that it provides a sense of allegiance to a particular group but also differentiates members of that group from others, religious education works to develop both of those aspects. Thus religious education always orients itself in some measure against

other traditions. When a Jain is educated by Jains about Jainism, he or she is also learning how he or she is different from non-Jains. Even if one takes up the study of the major religions of the world, say, for instance, within a Catholic school, the rationale for such study is rarely to convey the teachings of those other traditions with a value-free orientation. This would undermine the intrinsic conviction of the institution that its own religious tradition is the most desirable of the lot. Of course, such courses or teachings may serve the purpose of informing the student about shared or similar values in other traditions, may help to nurture tolerance of the beliefs and practices of others, and may enable processes of interfaith dialogue so that people from differing religious traditions may connect meaningfully with each other. However, less sympathetic reasons for such teachings or studies might be to offer tacit critiques of other religions, to enable students to better defend their own faith in discussions with non-believers, or to help them to work as effective missionaries for their own religious message.

In contrast, students in the discipline of religious studies strive to examine all aspects of religion (or religions) with a value-free orientation. The discipline aims towards objectivity. It is the responsibility of religious studies scholars to try to position themselves outside all religious traditions and then examine each with a healthy measure of neutrality. However, in the last few decades we have been made amply aware that complete neutrality or objectivity is only an ideal, which is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve perfectly. We are each grounded in our own cultural, religious, or philosophical backgrounds and study the world from those situated perspectives. We are male or female, young or old, with experiences that shape and color the lenses through which we view the world. Nevertheless, religious studies scholars attempt to maintain a high level of awareness and a critical, self-reflexive stance in order to discern how those factors, some of which are constant (e.g. gender) and others shifting (e.g. experience), affect their investigations.

Beyond the realization that absolute neutrality or objectivity is nearly impossible to achieve is the recognition that such an orientation may not be completely beneficial for the most fulfilling understanding of the human religious experience. The experience of religion can be a profoundly emotional constellation of feelings for participants, spanning such sentiments as guilt, euphoria, love, or obedience. The worldviews in some religions include beliefs in angels, devils, genies, dangerous spirits, gods, goddesses, animal protectors, ancestral ghosts, and so on. There may be beliefs in realms such as heavens, hells, parallel world systems, underworlds, and so on, which are not necessarily part of the reality construct of the student. Although some might argue that attempts to enter into those realities are futile, it is crucial that religious studies scholars strive to pierce those realities, even if these are only regarded as realms of the imagination. Can it be done? Of course it can. Anyone who has listened to a story, read a novel, watched a play, or seen a movie has temporarily suspended certain levels of disbelief and entered into the world conjured up by the narrative before them. This is particularly true for works of fiction. It is imperative for religious studies students to try to understand as much as possible about the worldview of the religion they are studying and to enter into it through a temporary

suspension of disbelief in order to resonate with the experience of some of the sentiments felt by adherents of that religion.

Some would argue that such an entry into the subjective dimensions of religion is undesirable, for it might color one's judgment, destroy one's own faith, and so on. While there are some valid cautions in such arguments, they are generally exaggerated. It is unlikely that someone entering the world of such fictive works as *The Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter novels would actually abide permanently in those imaginary worlds populated by sorcerers, elves, dragons, and so on. The German philosopher Goethe, promoting the value of learning other languages, commented that a person who knows only one language actually knows none. Indeed, in the same vein, the study of other religions may well enhance someone's understanding of his own religion (should he have one), or of religion itself, writ large. Just as learning another language does not necessarily impair one's facility with one's own mother tongue, so too the study of other religions does not necessarily handicap one's personal faith perspective. It may certainly cause one to reflect more profoundly on particular issues, but that is hardly a drawback.

The analogy of fictive works, however, has obvious limitations, even though for the student who is an outsider to a particular religion, that tradition's worldview and values may initially appear very much like works of fiction if not fantasy. However, for the Christian, the Muslim, the Jain, and the Siberian shaman, their religiously shaped worldviews are most certainly believed to be real. Thus the student of religion ought not to take a dismissive attitude to these varied religious realities, for it is a requirement of the discipline to take all features of the object of its study as worthy of attention and intellectual scrutiny. Aspects of these religions may represent the most cherished values and most profoundly regarded truths for their adherents, and it is incumbent on the student of religion to try to understand why that is so, without endorsing or embracing those beliefs. While the idea of ending up in a paradise in some uncertain upper realm, surrounded by angelic beings, fed with delectable food and drink, and so on, after this life ends, or suffering unimaginably horrible torments in some fiery hell located somewhere below, may seem like a childish fantasy to a skeptical outsider, such belief systems are widely held and are powerful enough to induce large numbers of people to die for the implications of those beliefs. Such beliefs may even induce them to kill others. Clearly, then, religious worldviews do not depict trivial realms as one might dismissively regard the worlds created in video games or sword and sorcery novels. Behaviors that religious worldviews elicit should not be taken lightly either. The exploration of these realities therefore requires the development of sensitivity and imagination in order to penetrate those worlds effectively. Most important, the student must work to develop a sense of critical judgment so as not to abide within those realms, for to study religion is to explore religious terrain but not set up one's home there. The student of religion should not be afraid to lay bare facts that contradict a religious tradition's claims (e.g. the historicity of events).

To study Buddhism does not require one to become a Buddhist, but it definitely helps if one understands the Buddhist conception of reality well enough to grasp why

such a perspective is appealing to the millions who adhere to that tradition and pursue its goals. This is why arguments that promote a completely objective stance are not very compelling in the discipline of religious studies. Complete objectivity belongs to the mechanisms of computers, not human beings. To understand religion (as with art, music, or literature) requires a measure of appreciation, which is an emotional response. To appreciate why something appeals to another human being, to some degree one must experience those feelings which obviously resonate more deeply within the other. To understand love, jealousy, compassion, desire, or fear, it is imperative to have some subjective experience of those feelings. However, the religious studies perspective is not that of the religious seeker, and the scholars' quest is not primarily, remotely, or necessarily to find a suitable religion for themselves. The delicate balance between subjective involvement in a studied religion's worldview and the objective analysis of that reality construct needs to be scrupulously maintained. One ought not to plunge into embracing the belief systems that are being studied to such a degree that it would impede one's capacity to reflect critically upon those religions. And although they may have immersed themselves in the study of a particular religious tradition, investing substantial amounts of their time and intellectual energies on it, religious studies scholars do not wish to have those efforts undermine their ability to examine other religious traditions with the highest possible degree of neutrality. Ideally, one needs to be able to explore the unknown religious territory with a great degree of subjective involvement and report back on what one has discovered with a high measure of objectivity.

Of course, these ideals regarding profound subjective involvement and rigorous objective analysis are ultimately unrealistic to execute perfectly. If a musician who is schooled in the Western classical tradition begins to explore the blues, rock, hip-hop, or jazz, he or she may well carry certain stylistic influences from those explorations into subsequent compositions and performances. While the religious studies scholar is more like a music critic than a musician, the analogy of influence through exposure still holds true. The exploration of different religious worldviews inevitably expands and transforms one's own worldview. One gathers new terminology and varied perspectives on the human condition and the purpose of existence. In this regard, too, the discipline of religious studies differs from religious education, for while the latter strives to nurture and strengthen a particular worldview and its accompanying value system, the discipline of religious studies moves students towards broadening their understanding of religion and humanity.

Theology and religious studies

Theology (*theos*—god + *logos*—study) is a term typically applied to intellectual reflections on the nature of the divine. Theologians are generally deeply rooted within particular religious traditions and conduct their speculative thinking within the lines of their tradition's doctrines. Sometimes their efforts are directed towards providing justifications for their religious beliefs and practices. So Christian

theologians might ponder the question “If God is just and loves humanity, why do seemingly good persons sometimes suffer terribly?” Note that there is already the assumption that there is a god (written with a capital G, as if there is definitely just one true god) who has certain characteristics (as per the doctrines of their faith), and so on.

If one reads definitions of theology written by theologians one might notice that many render *theos* as their vision of divinity, and often render the term *logos* as “science” to grant to their endeavor a sort of hallmark of rigorous method and systematic logic that we associate with the pure sciences, such as mathematics and physics. So they might set off by saying “theology is the science of God’s plan for humanity as laid out in the Bible.” Although sophisticated theology does try to apply the principles of logical argument when addressing questions, it typically compromises its logic in favor of the doctrinal or faith demands of the tradition. Thus a Muslim theologian may speculate on whether there are more gods than Allah but is unlikely to come to the conclusion that there are, or that there is no god at all. And a Christian theologian, nowadays, is unlikely to conclude that Jesus was fully human and not divine, although some did so in the past. Speculative philosophy is thus very much a part of theological thinking, but conclusions that contradict the fundamental beliefs of a religious tradition are generally not entertained, for this would put theologians into conflict with their tradition, sometimes with undesirable consequences, including excommunication or even death. Theological arguments that attempt to reaffirm, defend, or prove aspects of the doctrines of a tradition through the application of reason belong to the category of apologetics. And thus, in some measure, all theology is an exercise in apologetics.

This is what distinguishes theology from metaphysics (i.e. beyond physics), which is a branch of philosophy dedicated to a somewhat less bounded form of speculative thinking about the true nature of the whole of reality, especially that which exists beyond the grasp of the senses. When engaged in metaphysical thinking one might ask “Is there a god?” but not feel pressured to reach a positive conclusion. One might wonder, “Does the sense of an individual personality survive after death?” but not feel constrained to assume the existence of a soul, an afterlife, a heaven, hell, purgatory, and so on. One could thus suggest that theologies of any kind are a subset of metaphysics.

The discipline of religious studies, by contrast, is neither theology nor metaphysics. Religious studies has religion as its object of study, but does not attempt to promote or, for that matter, actually engage in the practice of religion. Thus scholars in the discipline may study theologies but should not engage in the act of theologizing (at least while engaged in their professional work). It is perhaps appropriate at this juncture to discuss the relationship between the personal and professional. Although Sir Isaac Newton was a Christian, he did not argue that the planetary bodies revolved around the sun because of God’s plan for humanity, but strove to uncover physical laws of nature and the mathematical relationships among objects to describe his laws of motion. He applied and embodied the scientific method when engaged in science and left his personal religious beliefs out of his discussions on the mathematical

principles underlying natural phenomena. Of course, Newton was one of the pioneers of the scientific method, and many of his contemporaries did not separate science from personal religious beliefs in their discussions. But in the centuries that followed, this has become the norm. Thus religious studies students or scholars (also sometimes known as “religionists,” although the term “religionist” traditionally means someone deeply committed to a faith) are expected to set aside their own beliefs or disbeliefs when conducting their research, and most certainly in the presentation of their work.

It is therefore possible for both the devout theologian and the confirmed atheist (one who does not believe in the existence of any supernatural divine entity) to engage in religious studies, provided they are capable of “bracketing” their personal positions when researching and reporting on their work. When combined with the previous observations on the value of subjective involvement the task becomes even more challenging. For those with deep commitments to particular worldviews (i.e. believers or non-believers), the neutral, objective stance may be difficult enough to achieve when studying a “foreign” religion. However, these individuals should ideally strive to move beyond the neutral into a subjective involvement with the tradition studied, unless it is their own. As it has sometimes been put, one should attempt to be an outsider to one’s own tradition (when studying it as a religious studies scholar), and an insider to other foreign traditions (those that one is studying). Thus, Christian or Muslim religious studies scholars should attempt to take up a stance outside Christianity or Islam and examine their own traditions with rigorous scientific scrutiny, for their personal involvement with their tradition, which has already given them the necessary advantage of subjective understanding, should now not act as an impediment to the objectivity demanded by the discipline of religious studies. And if studying Hinduism, the atheist (and Christian or Muslim) should attempt to do more than merely stand in some distant, seemingly neutral, location from the object of study. Here, one must strive to enter into a subjective experience of the tradition, so as not to be constrained in achieving a more thorough understanding of that religion by the seeming objectivity that the natural outsider status provides.

Are such changes in stance and bracketing of beliefs truly possible? Of course they are: imperfectly, perhaps, but they are definitely possible. Just as a scientist who may have personal convictions about the nature of something (e.g. that heavier objects fall faster than lighter ones), first steps back from those beliefs and then engages in experimentation to discover what is the truth, so too religious studies scholars must first step outside their personal belief systems in order to engage in their research. Just as a good actor puts on a costume and takes up the role of the fearless hero, the religious studies scholar takes up the role of an investigator of religious phenomena. Just as inept actors cannot stay in character, inept scholars let personal beliefs, biases, and such, tarnish the rigor with which they approach their research and reporting. Incidentally, the application of the scientific method to religious studies has led some scholars to call the discipline *Religionswissenschaft* (German for “the science of religion”). However, for other religious studies scholars, and for some of the reasons

mentioned above, the “scientific method” is not the most appropriate approach to the subject, and so the term has had limited appeal. Indeed we shall see in this book that there has been, and continues to be, a wide assortment of perspectives and approaches with which to study human religiosity.

Admittedly, the discipline of religious studies has been shaped by some perspectives and approaches more than others. It is a relatively young academic discipline that arose primarily in Western universities. As a result, most of the seminal figures in the early stages of religious studies were European and North American, and their approaches, perspectives, methods, questions, concerns, theories, types of evidence, and arguments have been shaped by their own orientation and institutional setting—including the norms of related disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, and to varying extents, theology. Religious studies has become increasingly global and inclusive. There is rich engagement with religious studies beyond Europe and North America as the home environment of scholars rather than just as sites of fieldwork. With this change there may be increasingly diverse perspectives, approaches, theories, and methods. In this book we are not trying to shape or predict this future so much as to provide a more modest overview of past developments as well as clarification of present practices, problems, approaches, and perspectives. As a result, most of the influential figures and seminal texts discussed in this book signal the Western origins of the discipline. We have attempted to ameliorate this in small ways, such as by the inclusion of Asian religious figures, concepts, examples, and perspectives. More could be done both in seeking out alternative modes of thinking about religion and testing the applicability of influential theories to Asian and other religious traditions. However, strides for greater balance and breadth in this regard are better directed toward future developments than toward a revisionist, or misleadingly selective, history.

Patterns in the study of religion

Religion has been and continues to be studied in a variety of ways. In this section we examine some of the most commonly encountered schemes and categories used to structure the study of religion. The divisions, categories, and themes employed to organize, compare, and understand religions sometimes reflect patterns found within religions themselves. They may also serve as patterns that give form to the study of religion. The religious studies scholar’s choices may seem obvious, or may simply mirror a religion’s own categories and divisions, which appear to be value-neutral. However, whenever we select an aspect to emphasize or a pattern to follow, we are actually shaping our object of study—religion—and influencing our analyses and conclusions.

Traditions

One of the most commonly encountered schemes used to approach the study of religion is to divide it into traditions. In a typical course on world religions, one is likely to find categories such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and so on. This division into “-isms” is an expedient and convenient scheme with which to begin the study of the human religious experience, because these traditions are widely accepted labels and cut a wide swath through the religions of the people of the world. Of course, the true nature of religion is far more complex. For instance, in parts of East Asia, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism can be deeply intertwined. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have certain similarities, sharing such ideas as the repeating cycles of time (creation and destruction of the cosmos) and the concept of rebirth. Thus scholars sometimes categorize religions by regions rather than traditions. They might prefer to talk about Japanese religions (which would then allow them to discuss the connections between Shinto, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), or East Asian religions, or South Asian religions.

It is quite common to find textbooks and courses on world religions divided into Eastern and Western religious traditions. The Western traditions typically include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (which share common features), and the Eastern traditions generally include Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto. The East–West category is not without its problems. The vast majority of Muslims, for instance, are in Eastern countries (such as the Middle East, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia) although Islam is categorized as a Western tradition. Some scholars have also noted that the three major “Western religions” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) actually originated in the Middle East, so that one could argue that they too are actually “Eastern traditions.”

Major religious traditions of the world

Buddhism: ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha (Awakened One); based on moral and contemplative practices.

Christianity: beliefs and practices of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who hold him to be the sole son of God; grounded in the principle of love.

Confucianism: moral and ethical approach to life based on the teachings of the Chinese scholar Confucius; grounded in maintaining orderly relationships through the cultivation of human virtues.

Daoism: philosophy, beliefs, and rites grounded on a profound relationship to the mysterious workings of nature.

Hinduism: constellation of beliefs and practices that include acceptance of the scriptural authority of the Vedas and the class/caste system; religion of the majority of the populace in south Asia.

Islam: beliefs and practices based on the message transmitted by the prophet Muhammad and preserved in the Qur'an; characterized by strict monotheism.

Jainism: ethical and philosophical system grounded in the teachings of Vardhamana Mahavira, known as the Jina (Conqueror); based on moral and contemplative practices.

Judaism: beliefs and practices of the Jews, a people who follow the teachings contained in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh); monotheistic; centred on maintaining a contractual agreement (covenant) with God.

Shinto: ritual-based tradition, with political overtones, indigenous to the islands of Japan, centered on the appeasement of spirits known as *kami*.

Sikhism: tradition primarily based on the moral and religious instructions of ten teachers (guru) and contained within a revered book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Of course there is also the problem regarding what is included or excluded in these schemes. Clearly the major religious traditions of the world are not the only religions in existence. There is a rich assortment of aboriginal religions in North and South America, in Africa, Australia, and in the islands of the Pacific. Are they any less worthy of study? And what about the many religions of the past, such as the Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian traditions, which have contributed much to the shape and form of contemporary religions? And when thinking about relationships and influences, is it really possible to understand Sikhism without knowledge of Islam and Hinduism, or Christianity without an understanding of Judaism, or Buddhism without Hinduism?

Furthermore, all these major traditions, when subjected to closer scrutiny, are actually composed of innumerable sects and subgroups. Among Muslims there are Sunnis and Shi'ites (and further subgroups). Among Christians, there are Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians. Among Jews, there are the Hasidim, Reform, and so on. Buddhism has its Mahayana and Theravada branches. And such divisions are themselves rather broad categories. Certain scholars have tried to emphasize and remind others that, in actuality, the degree of variation extends right down to the level of the individual, for the true constellation of beliefs and practices in any one person is unique to that person, and varies from every other, even those who profess the very same faith. No two Christians believe exactly the same thing, perform exactly the same religious activities, or share exactly the same interior disposition towards their religion. Although it is vital to keep this notion of individual variation in mind, it is not reasonable for the scholar of religion to attempt to study the individual

beliefs of each of the world's billions of people. And it is for this reason that scholars seek broader categories through which to tackle what would otherwise be an unimaginably vast field of study.

Categories

Besides the classic divisions based on religious traditions or geo-political regions, scholars sometimes approach the study of religion through thematic categories. Many religions have high or sacred regard for a certain text or texts. This literature falls under the broad category of scripture. So scholars may focus on the study of particular Hindu scriptures, such as the Vedas or the Puranas. Scriptures that are officially sanctioned by the orthodox authorities in a religious tradition comprise the religious canon of a particular tradition. While insiders of a religious tradition are not encouraged to read or study material that is outside the officially sanctioned canonical material, it is common for religious studies scholars to examine that outside material as well, for as much can be learned by what was excluded as by what was included. Thus the discovery of a number of Christian gospels at the Egyptian site of Nag Hammadi, which were not included in the Christian scriptures collectively known as the New Testament, might reveal much more about the nature of early Christianity, particularly at the time when the canon was being compiled, than merely reading the material from the New Testament.

Just as scripture (both canonical and non-canonical writings) might form a category for investigation, so too might the stories that are told, either in writing or in other media, such as in oral narratives or visual art. These stories are generally called myths, particularly if they deal with supernatural beings or events. While the term "myth" is commonly used to mean a false belief, religious studies scholars use it to refer to narratives that are believed to be true by adherents of a particular tradition. One person's falsehood is another person's fact, and it is not generally in the religious studies scholar's agenda to evaluate the truth within myths. Certain Christians believe the story of Noah, who survived a great deluge by sailing in a giant boat or ark, to be historical truth, and some Hindus believe that the god Rama, the subject of the epic *Ramayana*, was an actual person, whose birthplace was marked by a now-destroyed temple. Although those beliefs seem dubious, there are, at times, actual historical strata within the body of myths, and certain scholars do work to ascertain what kernels of historical truth, if any, are embedded in such ancient myths. For instance, through clues provided in the *Ramayana*, Indian archeologists found ancient settlements at Srīngaverapura, referred to in the myth. Similarly, work on the Greek epic, *The Iliad*, telling the myth of the battle that destroyed Ilium (Troy), enabled archaeologists to uncover the ruins of a city, Hissarlik, now fairly firmly identified as ancient Troy. This discovery does not prove that the myth was "true" in all of its features, but that in this case the narrative was built upon and around a nucleus of historical occurrences. Alternatively, in the Hindu tradition, the creator god Brahma emerges atop a lotus flower that grows from the navel of the preserver

god Vishnu. It may be easy for Christians to regard this Hindu depiction of the origins of the cosmos as a myth (without any historical nucleus), but more difficult to hear their own tradition's creation story about the primal couple Adam and Eve, or of Jesus' birth from a virgin, classified as myths.

Religion is always expressed in action, and among the kinds of actions encountered within religious traditions one frequently finds rituals. Ritual is a complex category of human behavior, not found exclusively within what is clearly accepted as religious activity. It may be seen in most spheres of life, from politics to sport. Why is ritual often connected to religion? Do rituals have meaning? What functions do they serve? How have they changed or why have they remained unchanged? Can individual private prayer be regarded as ritual, or is ritual only public and collective? Tackling such questions enables the scholar to discover more about the nature of religion through focusing upon such an action-centered category as ritual.

There are other such categories through which religion may be usefully studied. These include core beliefs, ethical teachings, and religious specialists. Another rewarding category is the study of symbols and symbolism, sometimes known as semiotics. We typically associate certain religions with key signs and symbols, such as the Om/Aum sign of Hinduism, Islam's crescent moon and star, and of course, the Christian cross. Symbols can certainly be misinterpreted because the same symbol may carry a different meaning in different cultures, or meanings may have changed over time. The fearsome-looking goddess Kali, who is loved, feared, and venerated by many Hindus, who holds a severed human head and wears a garland of skulls, may appear like a demon to some non-Hindus. Similarly, others would find it difficult to imagine that the image of a tortured human being nailed to a cross and left to die is a symbol of divine love, forgiveness, and spiritual redemption. Merely looking at a symbol will not necessarily yield its meaning, and so the scholarly study of religion requires that one penetrates into the history, cultural contexts, and value systems of a religious tradition in order to extract the meanings within its symbols.

Founders of various religious traditions

Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) (c. 1100s BCE): Iranian prophet considered to be the founder of Zoroastrianism, to whom the composition of ancient hymns (*gatha*), contained within the *Avesta*, are attributed; Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of ancient Persia, until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, and now exists primarily among the Indian Parsi community in Mumbai (Bombay).

Laozi (or Lao-tzu) (c. 500s BCE): Mythic Chinese philosopher, credited with the formulation of Daoist (Taoist) teachings and attributed with the authorship of the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*).

Kongzi (also K'ung Fu-tzu or Confucius) (551–479 BCE): Enormously influential Chinese teacher of social and ethical values; teachings contained in the *Analects*.

Vardhamana (c. 549–477 BCE): Indian teacher; known as Mahavira; associated with conveying the teachings of the Jains; he is regarded as the last in a series of twenty-four great teachers known as Tirthankaras.

Siddhartha Gautama (c. 490–410 BCE): Indian teacher; known as the Buddha (Awakened One), and founder of the Buddhist tradition; associated with teachings for the ending of suffering and the attainment of spiritual liberation (*nirvana*).

Jesus of Nazareth (c. 7 BCE–26 CE): Jewish teacher (rabbi), designated by his followers as the Messiah or Christ; pivotal figure in Christian beliefs, in which he is regarded as God in human form.

Muhammad (570–632 CE): Arabian prophet and founder of Islam; believed by Muslims to have received the instructions of Allah (God), contained in the Qur'an.

Nanak (1469–1538 CE): founder of the Sikh religious tradition; he is the first of ten teachers (*guru*) whose writings are contained within the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Joseph Smith (1805–1844 CE): American preacher and prophet; founder of the Mormon religious tradition or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS); believed by his followers to have received teachings from the prophet Mormon, which are contained in the religion's scripture, *The Book of Mormon*.

Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964): British civil servant, who together with **Doreen Valiente** (1922–1999), laid the foundation for the neo-Pagan movement, known as Wicca, which claims to have roots in pre-Christian spiritual traditions of nature worship.

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