

3 The essentials of religion

As a first step in retooling our local concept religion, to make of it a term that might be of technical use when scholars talk about the world of human actions, we consider what, for some people, might be the most common or sensible approach to defining anything, let alone religion: essentialism, or the substantive approach that assumes an enduring identity, core, substance, or, simply put, essence lurks deep within objects, making them what we say they are.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II,
Scene ii (c. 1597)

A notable early attempt to develop a technical—rather than relying on a common or **folk**—definition of religion as a universal human feature was that of the nineteenth-century **anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor** (1832–1917) in his influential book, *Primitive Culture* (1871, 2 vols.; reprinted today as *Religion in Primitive Culture*). As he wrote there:

A rudimentary definition of religion seems best to fall back at once on this essential source . . . belief in Spiritual Beings.

In this classic, minimalist definition we see the still common emphasis on religion as a **private**, intellectual activity (that is, **religion** equals believing in this or that, as if it is all about what goes on between your two ears) rather than an emphasis on, for example, the behavioral or the social components, as in **Émile Durkheim**'s (1858–1917) emphasis on **public ritual** and social institution in his still influential **sociological** study, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). As stated in Durkheim's often quoted definition:

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

Unlike Durkheim's sense of religion as something eminently *social* that you do with your body (making it public and, as such, observable), for Tylor, religion is an eminently *individual* thing that you do with your mind (making it private and so an item of **experience**).

In Tylor's onetime popular definition we therefore find the remnants of a philosophically **idealist** era in European history, when one's membership within certain groups was thought to be primarily dependent upon whether one *believed in* something (for example, agreed with the claims made in a creed or in a pledge of allegiance), rather than membership being the result of collective behaviors, such as a group of soldiers saluting a flag or people standing in unison to sing a national anthem (as argued in Durkheim's work). In fact, this idealist presumption still persists today, inasmuch as the institutions some scholars of religion refer to as 'the cumulative **tradition**' (the mere externals of religious experience, they might say) are thought to be a somewhat deadened (that is, unreflective, automatic, etc.) behavioral expression of a prior, dynamic affectation often known as '**faith**' or 'belief' (e.g., see **Wilfred Cantwell Smith**'s classic 1962 work, *The Meaning and End of Religion*). We can easily find something like this distinction in popular culture today—not to mention back during the Protestant Reformation—in which people regularly distinguish between something they call **spirituality**, on the one hand, and on the other the institution of religion. 'I'm not

religious,' they say, 'I'm spiritual' (what is now called SBNR: **spiritual but not religious**)—**translation**: 'I do not participate in unthinking ritual and pointless institution but, instead, participate in an inner, personal quest.' (Yes, the judgmental nature of this claim is often part of what is being said.) That such people did not come up with this way of thinking on their own, let alone originate the particular path on which they say they are traveling, indicates that they too are part of long established traditions and institutions with rituals of their own—such as saying 'I'm not religious, I'm spiritual'. It's just that such people are participating in a *different* and more than likely *competing* tradition, requiring devices to distinguish it and, then, authorize it over the others.

With its emphasis on the intellectual or **cognitive** component (along with such other early scholars as **Herbert Spencer** [1820–1903] and **James G. Frazer** [1854–1941], Tylor is numbered among a group today called the **intellectualists**, a nineteenth-century anthropological tradition), Tylor's work offers an example of a classic definitional strategy: **essentialism**. Because the social movements **classified** as religions struck such observers as obviously having a number of different *outward* characteristics, many of which were explained away as mere **historical** accidents (that is, the result of specific cultural or geographic context, none of which were essential, however), they thought it unwise to define religion based on what they took to be its merely secondary, external, and thus unnecessary or what they might have termed its merely accidental aspects. Instead, like many others, Tylor reasoned that one ought to identify 'the deeper motive which underlies them'. Belief in spiritual beings, he concluded, was just such a deeper and thus universal motive; in fact, he concluded that it was the 'essential source' for all religions. Accordingly, his **naturalistic theory of religion** sought to account for the universal belief in spiritual beings (a theory known as **animism**). We therefore refer to Tylor's definition as essentialist (sometimes also termed substantivist or **monothetic**): it identifies the one essential, fundamental, basic, and non-negotiable feature (or substance) *without which something cannot be what it is*.

In other words, if, as the German Protestant **theologian Rudolf Otto** (1869–1937) once argued in his influential book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), that which sets religions apart is the participant's feeling of awe and fascination when in the presence of what Otto termed the **mysterium tremendum** (the compelling yet repelling mystery of it all), then without evidence of this sense of awe and fascination there is no religion. This feeling of utter awe (a complex combination of fear, trembling, fascination, and attraction) was, for Otto, the essence of religion—something that could only be apprehended by the participant. For the late eighteenth-century German theologian **Friedrich Schleiermacher** the essence was, similarly, 'a feeling of absolute dependence'; for the early twentieth-century Dutch **phenomenologist** of religion, **Gerardus van der Leeuw**, it was 'power'; for the early twentieth-century theologian **Paul Tillich** it was 'faith in an ultimate

concern' (which he once defined, in an unhelpful circular fashion, as 'a concern about the truly ultimate'); for the late nineteenth-century **psychologist** of religion, **William James**, it was an experience peculiar to so-called **charismatic** 'religious geniuses' that, once expressed, taught, reproduced, and, finally, institutionalized, was prone to deteriorate; and for the **historian of religions**, **Mircea Eliade**, it was the experience of the **sacred**—which he defined as 'not the profane' (a rather less than useful definition, for it begs us now to define **profane**).

Although Tylor's classic definition differs significantly from all of these others (inasmuch as his anthropological, or *etic*, perspective aimed first to **describe** and then to **explain** the **cause** of such beliefs, whereas the others all presumed that the object of the belief existed independently of believers, thus prompting their responses), all of these scholars went about the task of definition in the same manner: the **inductive** method was used, whereby one compares a number of **empirical** examples, looking for their underlying similarity. We see here the common strategy (e.g., from the late nineteenth century until today) of employing the comparative method to identify non-empirical similarity, such that certain types of all too obvious difference are understood to be nonessential features of **contingent** history—an approach characteristic of a number of scholars, from Frazer's famous and influential multi-volume *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (first edition 1890) to Mircea Eliade's (1907–86) now classic work, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949). Today, this approach is most evident in the work of scholars of religion who attempt to identify what they maintain to be the deep and timeless similarities among the **world's religions**—an effort that generally goes by the name of religious pluralism or **inter-religious dialogue** (e.g., **Martin Marty** and **Diana Eck**). Thus, the study of religion, at least as carried out by some contemporary scholars, is an exercise in identifying what is asserted by some to be a profoundly human, and thus deeply humane, element—sometimes called the human spirit or **human nature**. Based on this presumably shared item, feeling or value, mutual understanding across cultural and historical divides is believed to be possible; after all, studying 'their' sacred symbols, narrative or practices inevitably strikes a chord with 'us' (e.g., the cross-cultural comparative work of **Wendy Doniger**).

Much as with a light switch that can either be on or off—there's no such thing as a light being only partially on, right? (more on this later)—essentialist definitions lead one to name something as religion if, *and only if*, it possesses a certain quality or trait that the definer deems necessary or required—sometimes called its substance, such that an essentialist definition can also be known as a substantive definition. That just what characterizes this essential quality differs (sometimes dramatically, as evidenced above) from one essentialist to another ought not to be overlooked.

A classic attempt to define something's essence can be found throughout the work of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato (427–347 BCE). Writing in a dialogue style—somewhat akin to reading a play (but without stage

directions), in which different characters represent contrary viewpoints, all of which collectively explore a topic, such as ‘What is justice?’—Plato’s efforts seem to have been directed toward identifying that one quality without which something was not what you said it was. Of particular interest to us is Plato’s already mentioned dialogue, the *Euthyphro* (believed by scholars to have been written sometime in the late 300s BCE). This dialogue takes the form of a chance encounter between Plato’s teacher—and the main character in his dialogues—Socrates (470–399 BCE), and a younger character named Euthyphro, both of whom are about to enter the Athenian law courts. Socrates is there to be prosecuted for being impious (the ancient Greek term *asebia*); the charge against him is that he corrupts the minds of the youth and invents new gods not condoned by the Athenian city-state, as this charge is laid out in the dialogue that usually follows the *Euthyphro* in modern editions, entitled the *Apology* (from the Greek *apologia*, meaning to speak in defense of a position; that this is not at all what we mean by an apology today is a good example of how words are historical artifacts too, changing over time). Euthyphro, we learn, is there to prosecute his own father for the murder of a farm laborer (or, to be frank, a slave) who was himself a murderer. Given that charging one’s own father with a crime meant that one risked being judged impious—in fact, Socrates is quite startled to hear Euthyphro say he was charging his own father with a crime, for what child knows better than a father?—Socrates proceeds on the assumption that Euthyphro must indeed know what marks the distinction between a truly pious and an impious act. Otherwise, why would Euthyphro perform an action that dishonors his own father? Because of his own impending trial for being impious, Socrates could use an expert’s opinion on what is and what is not pious (or, as we’ve already seen, what in ancient Greek was termed the quality of *eusebia*): ‘I think that I cannot do better than be your disciple’, he says to Euthyphro. The short dialogue that follows, with all its twists and turns, is thus begun with Socrates’ simple and seemingly naïve—yet terribly persistent—effort to have Euthyphro arrive at a clear and defensible definition (whether Socrates is read as a naïve and sincere or a pompous, even sarcastic, dialogue partner is, of course, left up to each reader to determine).

‘Tell me, then,’ asks Socrates, ‘what is piety and what is impiety?’

But, before proceeding, it is worth noting, as does Luther H. Martin in his little book, *Hellenistic Religions* (1987), that what for us moderns might be understood as ‘religion’, a seemingly obvious concept most often distinguishable from such other social institutions as politics or economics (as in my earlier example of a newspaper editor with a choice to make), the ancient Greeks might have considered to be divisible into three rather distinct things: piety (*eusebia*), mystery (Greek *myo*, meaning to shut one’s eyes out of fear or danger) and *gnosis* (from the Greek, meaning secret or esoteric knowledge; from which we today derive the term **agnostic**). Whereas the first has already been discussed and will be elaborated below, the second

refers to ancient **cults** in which members were initiated into the mysterious workings of the cosmic order (implying the relations between mortals and immortals), and the third refers to a tradition in which one's personal salvation was thought to depend upon gaining special, privileged knowledge (as opposed to intellectual or philosophical knowledge; *gnosis* is therefore to be distinguished from another Greek term, *episteme*, meaning rational knowledge, from which we get our philosophical term epistemology, the rational study of knowledge systems). If one is interested in studying 'ancient Greek religion'—especially when using 'religion' in the fashion we've come to use it today as a system of belief in gods and experiences associated with these beliefs—one must therefore collect together beliefs and behaviors from these three otherwise distinct ancient aspects of Greek society, *as if* they were all somehow essentially interrelated. Not that this is wrong, but it is hardly the way ancient Greeks themselves might have understood the way their world was organized.

So this prompts a question: is there something being lost in so easily assuming that our way of understanding the world is shared by everyone, whether past or present?

Perhaps, for as already noted, in ancient Greek, the term *eusebia* (or later, in Latin *pietas*) signified reverence, honor, and esteem—notably as evident in social and legal relationships. They were not primarily concerned with proper beliefs about invisible powers. Instead, examples would include the proper relations between husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave, soldiers and commanders, and in addition, between mortals and the immortals. Of course a pious Greek would engage in the proper rituals with regard to various gods and ceremonies but would also ensure that relations with social superiors, peers and inferiors were carried out according to the rules of propriety (that is, social expectations). In Plato's ancient Greek society, the quality attributed to others known as *eusebia* therefore signified a wide system of ordinary social practices concerning one's relations with many different sorts of others—relations that extend from the family to the gods, from social inferiors to superiors.

Because we are told that **philosophy**, for Socrates, was the effort to obtain self-knowledge in order to live the just and worthy life (as he is said to have remarked, 'The unexamined life is not worth living'), then **critical** inquiry into one's actions and motivations was considered the basis for philosophical inquiry. Because one's actions are rarely, if ever, completely private, but instead are social in origin and implication (even thinking to yourself could be considered social, not just because it is probably in response to a situation but because the language and ideas didn't spring from the ground on their own), we can see not only the social role played by Socratic philosophical inquiry (e.g., the **dialectical**, or back-and-forth, question/answer teaching method) but, more importantly for us, the intersection between philosophical inquiry and claims to piety. In other words, since piety necessitates knowing, and then acting on, the right social relations, philosophy

(that is, public argumentation) can scrutinize those who claim to possess the quality of piety. Such scrutiny is a critical activity since it examines claims that present themselves as beyond examination (somewhat akin to the academic study of religion, perhaps?). For example, it can demonstrate that to boast to have knowledge of piety (as does Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue) is to lack self-knowledge; such a boast would then, ironically, constitute an act of impiety.

In the *Euthyphro* we have a number of such ironies that no doubt would have been immediately evident to the ancient Greek reader: we have a young man who boasts of having privileged knowledge of what is and what is not pious, and he is bold enough not only to charge his own father with a crime (as if he knows better) but also to set about instructing an older man renowned for his own skills at critical inquiry (don't forget, both his father and Socrates are Euthyphro's social superiors). And Socrates has been charged with being impious by yet another young man (who, we're told, can't even grow a decent beard). Issues that involve transgressing rank, honor, and privilege should immediately come to the reader's mind. (Speaking of transgression, perhaps **Mary Douglas's** insights into classification and **taboo** have some relevance here?) What is therefore of interest is that a dialogue attempting to define the essence of *eusebia* is set within a context ripe with conflicts over rank and power. For the sake of justice, Euthyphro claims that he must prosecute his father—in spite of the fact that *the man is his father*—rather than exercise the 'proper' and conventional relations (entailing respect and esteem for one's father). Socrates therefore seems justified in inquiring if Euthyphro really is aware of just what constitutes piety. So Plato's character Socrates sets about practicing his dialectical method on Euthyphro, the very method of inquiry that has landed Socrates in a lawsuit of his own.

To Socrates' seemingly straightforward question, 'Tell me, then, what is piety and what is impiety?', Euthyphro offers a variety of answers across the dialogue, each of which Socrates critiques on various grounds, until Euthyphro is led to repeating one of his previous yet inadequate definitions. The various definitions offered by Euthyphro are as follows:

- 1 Piety means prosecuting the unjust individual; impiety is not to prosecute.
- 2 Piety is what is pleasing to the gods; impiety is displeasing to the gods.
- 3 Piety is what all the gods love; impiety is what they all hate.
- 4 Piety is service to the gods; impiety is no attention to the gods.
- 5 Piety is to know that one's words and actions are acceptable to the gods.
- 6 Piety is the science of asking of the gods and giving to them.
- 7 Piety is the art of carrying on business between gods and human beings.
- 8 Piety is that which is loved by the gods (see 3 above).

When people are asked to define something, they often start by providing an example of it. In the case of Euthyphro, to Socrates' seemingly innocent

question, ‘What is piety?’, he first answers that prosecuting criminals is pious (or ‘Doing what I am doing now’, as phrased by Eurthyphro in a line from the dialogue that is difficult to read as anything but pompous). But Socrates is unsatisfied, for this, he answers, is not a definition of piety. If you were asked to define, for instance, ‘tree’, would it suffice for you to answer, ‘Yes, a maple is a tree, so is an oak, and an aspen, and a redwood, and also a willow’? There is a difference between offering a *definition* and providing an *example*, no? (Do you recall the Internal Revenue Service declining to define ‘church’ but, instead, offering examples of what they meant, such as a mosque or a synagogue . . .?) So it is reasonable that someone might inquire about the criterion (or criteria, if more than one—more on that later . . .) that you employed to narrow down the many things of daily experience to just this or that. That criterion is part of your essentialist definition, for without satisfying it the thing is not what you say it is. If the color red is essential to a stop sign then putting the word “Stop” on a yellow sign just won’t work. Socrates is interested in that one thing that all pious actions share—their essence—for, if he can identify what it is about prosecuting criminals that makes it pious, then he can employ that criterion to classify other acts that share this trait—something that would be of tremendous use in his own defense.

(Aside: do you see how definition and **utility**, or usefulness, are linked? Socrates seeks to define piety because he needs to defend himself in court. Thus, could we hazard a guess that, instead of being right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate, definitions are *more or less useful*, all depending on one’s goals? Could it therefore be that definitions are tactical tools that allow one to get on with producing knowledge about the world—a knowledge that, instead of being innocent and objective, is intimately linked to social interests of the definer?)

For our purposes, the key to this dialogue is Socrates’ seemingly simple question that follows Euthyphro’s third attempt at a definition: ‘Is something pious because the gods love it or do they love it because it is pious?’ In other words, what makes mere stuff (like Mary Douglas’s ‘matter’ that can either be classified as ‘soil’ or ‘dirt’, depending on what you want to do with it [interesting how definition, utility and interests have arisen yet again]) into specific things to which we give names and values: is it our actions toward them that give them value and significance (e.g., loving them, despising them, needing them, ignoring them, etc.) or do we, instead, passively recognize in them some inner quality or substance, beneath their surface—some essence that prompts us to act accordingly toward them?

Case in point: is beauty, as some people say, ‘in the eye of the beholder’ (meaning that beauty is a function of each person’s taste or aesthetic sense) or is it more than just skin deep? Does beauty reside deep within the object of art itself, awaiting our careful recognition? As with Romeo’s identity, in this chapter’s opening quotation, would it be the same regardless of his name? As applied to ‘religion’, is there some inner essence shared by all

things that are religious, or is 'religion' a classification some of us give to certain human (and thus observable) actions, acts that we select from a wide array, giving them a label we use for a purpose and these purposes change from person to person? Does religion have an *essence* or is it a *function* of human behavior, needs, and interests?

Knowing that by the end of Plato's text *Euthyphro* quite literally runs off (either in frustration or embarrassment), leaving Socrates' quest for the essence of *eusebia* unfinished—'Another time, Socrates; for I am in a hurry, and must go now'—suggests that, despite Plato's apparent preference for an essentialist definition (something that is evident throughout his many dialogues), the search for an essence may be a hopeless affair. For, as already indicated, there may be as many essences as there are essentialists—or, to put it another way, there may be as many essences as there are interests that drive the effort to nail down the world as if it were comprised of stable, uniform pieces. (Think here of lawyers all arguing over what a legal law *really* means or readers disagreeing on the main point of a novel . . .) So, perhaps we ought to pay attention to these interests that apparently drive our efforts to define and make generic aspects of the world into items of **discourse**.

Criticisms

So yes, there are indeed some problems entailed in an essentialist approach. For example, consider that group of scholars already mentioned, a group which predated the rise of functionalism: the intellectualists (known by this name due to their presumption that all human beings, past and present, shared certain shared intellectual traits, such as curiosity and a need to solve problems). This group of nineteenth-century anthropologists (or perhaps we should refer to them as the precursors to, or even the founders of, the field today known as anthropology) were very interested in **origins**—to explain something, they assumed, required one to account for its original state and, then, its change over time. Let's consider Tylor's once well-known theory of animism as our example, which we have already mentioned; to explain why people today believe in what he termed spiritual beings, Tylor performed what we might call a thought experiment. He asked his readers to imagine an early human being waking from what you and I commonly refer to as a dream. However, unlike modern people, who have a fairly complex understanding of the difference between being awake and asleep, let alone the differences between our notions of subject and object, this 'savage philosopher', as Tylor imagined an early human being, was (like many of his contemporaries also assumed) rather child-like and therefore not aware of just what a dream was, let alone did that person possess what some today consider a commonsense assumption about dreams being the site where subconscious needs are expressed symbolically (a widespread assumption that we owe to the enduring influence of **Sigmund Freud's** work). Despite the very real differences that likely existed between us and our ancient relatives, Tylor argued (in ways that many find very troublesome today, indeed) that his hypothetical early humans were still *much like us* for they were profoundly interested in accounting for unanticipated things in their environment (what we might refer to as anomalies). Being like us, they were therefore curious problem solvers. It's just that, for many scholars of Tylor's time, early humans were also thought to be unlike us inasmuch as they were assumed to be evolutionarily earlier than us and did not therefore have access to the sort of scientific methods and higher intellectual capabilities that we do. Nonetheless, using the rudimentary methods and skills that were at hand, Tylor concludes that these so-called savage philosophers must have arrived at a satisfactory explanation to account for the odd thing of experiencing themselves elsewhere or why they were able to interact with long-dead ancestors (all of which you and I know, inasmuch as we are moderns, to have been taking place in their dreams, of course). Concluding that there must be something that can leave the body, even outlive the body—perhaps we can simply call it a **soul**?—struck Tylor as a pretty sensible way for such an early human being to solve this puzzle and account for what must have appeared to them as such an odd experience. Therefore, for Tylor, the natural cause of religion—the belief in spiritual beings, or, as he

called it, animism—could be explained by understanding its origin, and its origin was, he speculated, based on our ancient ancestors solving puzzles by using their inevitably faulty reasoning about how the natural world worked.

Of course, few scholars today would classify themselves as intellectualists in quite this way (though the presumption of common cognitive mechanisms among human beings is now shared by many scholars), for there are a number of problems with this form of scholarship. To name but one, consider Tylor's conclusion: the hypothetical 'savage philosopher' explained his experience as the result of his having a soul. As appealing as this theory may be to some readers, we should ask a simple question: is Tylor's theory of animism *correct*?

To answer this, we need to determine a set of criteria so that we can judge whether Tylor's theory of animism is persuasive and accurate. But here we run into a brick wall for, short of inventing time travel to allow us to be present when his early human awoke from a dream, so that we could observe this person and ask them questions (but in what language?), we cannot really come up with a way to *test* Tylor's theory, to demonstrate it to be either right *or* wrong (something like listening to the bulb while shaking it to test our hypothesis about it being burnt out). It is for this reason that some came to question whether Tylor even had a **theory**, for theories are, by definition, empirically testable (thus, for example, **intelligent design**, the view that a cosmic designer created the universe, is, for scientists [especially those who identify with the **positivist** tradition], not a theory whatsoever), as opposed to an untestable hunch, guess, or speculation, premised on the once common but now terribly problematic late nineteenth-century assumption that early humans must have thought in a simplistic manner, solving problems as do contemporary children (after all, nineteenth-century scholars often referred to their idea of early humanity as 'the childhood of the species').

To make a long story short, the problem with explaining contemporary events in terms of their origins is that the origin is long gone and remains only as a product of modern speculations that cannot help but to project contemporary assumptions backward in time, much as with Tylor's rather Victorian sense of what early humans must have been like (crude but dogged problem solvers) or, to pick a more accessible example, like the way that old movies depicting the future tend to look more like the time when the movies were made than the future they once thought they were depicting—after all, the old *Star Trek* TV show (e.g., their clothing, hairstyles, language, let alone the themes to the episodes, etc.) looks an awful lot like the 1960s while the reboot tends to look like the 1980s—even though they were each supposedly set in our distant future. As such, one guess *might* be as good as any other because the standard against which one measures the guesses—about some actual origin—cannot be retrieved.

Given just how troublesome it is to try to explain current events in light of their origins—such as answering a question concerning why people

sometimes throw salt over their shoulders by saying, ‘Well, a long time ago . . .’—one can see the appeal for some late nineteenth-century, and many early twentieth-century, scholars to shift the ground considerably. Instead of speculating on a long lost original essence or state of affairs, they tried instead to account for the contemporary, observable purpose something serves or the need it fulfills. The early twentieth-century anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (who helped shift the field to its current emphasis on detailed **fieldwork**) comes to mind; writing of scholars just a generation before him, he said:

in historical science, no one could expect to be seriously treated if he made any mystery of his sources and spoke of the past as if he knew it by divination. In Ethnography [our sources] . . . are not embodied in fixed, material documents, but in the behavior and in the memory of living men.

Early functionalists, like Malinowski—who no doubt benefit greatly from much earlier generations of scholars intent on explaining religion by means of appeals to its historical origins (such as **David Hume**’s work in the eighteenth century)—made just this switch, seeing their intellectualist predecessors as doing something other than empirical science. This new focus on the contemporary and the observable made functionalist theories testable, and, as they argued, truly scientific.

Example: ‘he’s your father!’

Setting of the sitcom’s near final scene: Ray, who is middle-aged and lives across the street with his wife, Debra, and their three young children, enters his parents’ home, by the back door, into the kitchen, where his retired father, Frank, is seated alone at the table eating soup and working on a jigsaw puzzle. Immediately prior to this, on a Saturday morning while his father, unannounced, was starting to paint Ray and Debra’s house, Ray and his adult brother Robert had, again, argued with their father and then Ray suddenly fired him, for being uncooperative, bossy, and deciding to paint the house a color that Debra didn’t want—though, upon later hearing this, she replied: ‘Wow—actually, yellow would be kinda nice . . . It’s sunny.’ So, after telling them what he did, Ray’s always intruding mother, his long-suffering wife, and even brother (who has his own issues from living in Ray’s shadow) all advise him to go next door and apologize to his father, with Robert ending that scene by commenting, in a low, accusatory voice: ‘He’s your father!’

Ray: (Enters the kitchen’s back door, somewhat sheepishly, trying to be nonchalant) Listen. I’m sorry about before. Okay? So . . ., come back over and we’ll do it yellow. Yellow’s okay. I talked Debra into it. Okay . . .?

Frank: No.

R: What do you mean no?

F: I mean I’m not interested. I’m kind of busy right now.

R: Oh right, I see. You got soup. And a puzzle. Well, it doesn’t have to be right now. Whenever you feel like it . . . What, you’re eating out of a pot ‘cause you don’t like to clean a bowl?

F: No, it’s better this way.

R: Oh. (Frank places a puzzle piece, pleased with himself) Hey, that’s a keen eye you got there. (Ray reads the title of the puzzle on the box’s cover) ‘The Death of General Stonewall Jackson’. You like this one?

F: Very interesting figure in history. Considered the Confederacy’s finest general. Shot by one of his own men. (Frank looks directly at Ray for the first time, somewhat accusingly)

R: All right, will you stop? God, I can’t believe I invited you back. I can’t believe I apologized to you even.

F: Well you should apologize to me. I was right!

R: How are you right? How are you right?! It’s my house and you wanted to paint it yellow! How is that right?

F: (Frank stands, raises his voice, angrily, speaking directly to Ray) Because yellow covers better! It won’t fade as fast! And you got white houses on either side of you! It makes your house pop a little! And it goes with your trim and the friggin’ little daisies you got!

R: Well, why didn't you just say that?

F: I shouldn't have to say it!

R: What?

F: Because if I say it's yellow, that should be good enough for you!
I shouldn't have to explain everything. I'm right!

Everybody Loves Raymond, 'Frank Paints the House',
season 5, episode 24 (2001)

I'm not sure whether others have the DVD of this old sitcom episode on a shelf in their office, like I do, or maybe have access to it via a streaming service, but it's likely easy to find online, at least some of the episode's scenes, such as the one quoted above. I find it pretty handy for a couple reasons—first off, it helps to get us thinking about the similarities between our own social world and that of the ancient Greeks, despite the pretty obvious differences. For this ancient notion of *eusebia* (or, for the ancient Romans, *pietas*, let alone the ancient Indian notion of doing one's *dharma*, etc.) is often greeted by students encountering it for the first time as rather strange and alien to them—which, in some ways, it certainly is, of course, since it derives from a group of people removed from us in time by over two thousand years and who might not place the same emphasis as we do on the supposedly lone and rugged individual. But, if the right examples are raised, it doesn't take long to start to realize that it is actually rather familiar since identity and value today might be just as tied to social relationships as they were then. For in class discussions it quickly becomes apparent that, for many students, calling their parents by Mom's or Dad's first name, or doing so with their professor—at least to their face—crosses what many students may see to be a number of lines, and therefore makes them feel rather uneasy. So the story of Ray pulling rank, as we say, on his own father—despite Ray having some pretty good reasons to finally stand up to him (let's be honest, despite having a soft, even endearing side, Frank is kind of mean)—nicely illustrates this rather old, but still relevant, **Confucian** notion of filial piety: the lifelong respect toward a parent expected of a son or daughter. Failing to exhibit such deference to a social superior, like (but not limited to) a father or a mother, means that one risks one's place (and whatever privileges that may come with it) in your wider social world—like Frank turning the tables by firing Ray at the very end of that scene, after Ray apologizes and then agrees that Frank's in charge! As such, the titles we commonly use for people who occupy a status other than our own (like me calling Russell Sr. 'Dad') are doing significant social work—but doing it so efficiently, so subtly, that we tend not to even notice.

So, lesson one: there may be some rather uniform issues of rank and identity that operate cross-culturally, suggesting that the unfamiliar may sometimes not be so strange after all. If so, what other examples could you come up with where issues of rank, behavior, and identity are intertwined,

whether one is dealing with peers or those who are at very different places in the social hierarchy? (Aside: we all live within social hierarchies, no?)

But there's at least a second lesson here: for playing this episode in a religious studies classroom, or including a discussion of it in a book meant for a religious studies class, might strike some as being a bit odd (just as odd as a chapter devoted to Mount Everest perhaps?). But my hunch is that if we overcome our modern tendency to see religion as an interior dimension of relevance only to a certain day of the week or only to certain ways of talking and acting and, instead, see the actions that we now commonly associate with religion as being part of how human beings simply navigate and negotiate their complex and ranked social worlds, then such an observer might have no trouble seeing Ray's trials and tribulations as a good place to think through what it means to be pious. To rephrase: although I know it's based on a speculative fantasy on my part, my guess is that an ancient person would easily conclude that Ray was being impious—no more or less so than if he had failed to participate in the proper ceremonies with regard to this or that god.

So, lesson two? All depending on how we define religion, some surprising things may start to count as data and thus constitute a place to study it. If so, then how would you have to define religion in order to see Ray and Frank as worthwhile to study? And what implicit (or should I call them folk?) definitions must be up and running in order to see this example as irrelevant to the field?

Further considerations

I'm guessing that, though members of our society seem to assume that it is comprised of bold individuals who are free from social constraint (or ought to be free from it), there are many instances where we can demonstrate that one's social status depends upon exhibiting proper behavior toward others in your group, and doing so in the expected manner. The examples can be elaborate and complex, of course, but they might also be quite mundane—such as the way many readers in North America might slightly raise their head while also quickly raising their eyebrows when walking past someone they recognize—a gesture that expects the same thing returned, as a sign of mutual recognition (not unlike how saying 'How you doing?' for many English speakers is often greeted in reply with 'How you doing?'). This sort of casual nod is used in specific cases, when the social relationship is informal and, more than likely, not too deeply significant to both parties (that is, you'd never pass by your mother or your boss and just do this, without talking, as you kept on walking). While the relationship between those silently nodding as they pass is probably based on far more than this one gesture, failing to offer this gesture in reply as the proper and expected response would likely result in what we'd call a social slight toward the party who initiated the ritual. And now the relationship is at risk; one party feels ignored.

Whether we'd go so far as to call the one who failed to nod impious is open to debate, of course, but it provides an example of the ordinary and often-overlooked mechanisms that members of social groups employ to manage and maintain their place (that is, their status—even if that means they are peers) within the group, relations that are constantly under construction and thus hardly natural or inevitable. My hunch is there are plenty of other examples—among them are surely examples of members at very different social positions where the stakes may be far higher than in the case of failing to return a nod. For instance, why do you almost always bring something with you, like a bottle of wine, when invited over to someone else's house to eat, never even expecting that they'll open it at dinner . . .?

Summary of vocabulary

Notes

Agnosticism
Animism
Anthropology
BCE/CE
Belief
Cause
Charisma
Church
Classification
Cognitive science
Confucianism
Contingent
Cult
Description
Dialectic
Discourse
Emic/etic
Empirical
Essentialism
Eusebia
Experience
Explanation
Faith
Fieldwork
Folk knowledge
History
History of religion(s)
Human nature
Idealism
Induction
Intellectualism
Intelligent design
Inter-religious dialogue
Modernity
Monothetic/polythetic definitions
Mysterium tremendum et fascinans
Naturalistic theories of religion
Origins
Phenomenology
Philosophy
Positivism
Private
Profane

Psychology
Public
Religion
Ritual
Sacred
Society
Sociology
Soul
Spiritual but not religious (SBNR)
Spirituality
Taboo
Theology
Theory
Tradition
Translation
Utility
World religions

Summary of scholars

Wendy Doniger
Mary Douglas
Émile Durkheim
Diana L. Eck
Mircea Eliade
James G. Frazer
Sigmund Freud
David Hume
William James
Martin Marty
Rudolph Otto
Friedrich Schleiermacher
Wilfred Cantwell Smith
Herbert Spencer
Paul Tillich
Edward Burnett Tylor
Gerardus van der Leeuw