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What Is Religion?

*Come, Agni, praised with song, to feast and sacrificial offering:
Sit as Hotar on the holy grass! . . .
O Agni, him who, like a chariot, wins us wealth.
Do thou, O Agni, with great might guard us from all malignity,
Yea, from the hate of mortal man!
O Agni, come; far other songs of praise will I sing forth to thee. . . .
O Agni, bring us radiant light to be our mighty aid,
for Thou art our visible deity!*

—HINDU SCRIPTURE, SAMA VEDA (1:1:1:1,5–7,10)

*Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*

—CHRISTIAN HYMN, ISAAC WATTS (1719)

The first step to understanding religion is identifying what religion *is*. What are we even talking about?¹ Scholars have long argued over many rival definitions of religion. Some have given up trying to define it.² Others have

1. Although my account eschews Durkheim's explanation of religion as grounded in the sacred and collectively constituted—proceeding instead along Weberian lines reframed by critical realism—my procedural insistence on defining religion up front is Durkheimian, not Weberian.

2. Andrew Greeley, for example, wrote, "I make no assumptions in the beginning of this exercise about a proper definition of religion. There exists a bitter and useless controversy in the

decided that religion does not even exist “out there” to be studied and understood, but is only a modern, Western invention imposed on the world for political and religious purposes.³ I think, on the contrary, that religion is a real, distinctive, and enduring part of human life, and that we can describe its nature in specific terms.⁴

To properly identify what religion *is*, however, we need to do three things. First, we must turn our attention away from various debated *concepts* of religion and focus instead on the *reality* of religion as it is found in actual human lives and societies. Our initial point of reference needs to be not the many different ways one can think about religion, but the concrete realities of religions in the world that we are trying to think about.⁵ Second, we need to put on hold our interest in the *ideas and beliefs* of religious people, and concentrate on their religious *practices*, that is, on repeated, religiously meaningful behaviors. The common bias toward an “intellectualist” view of religion needs to be corrected with a primary focus instead on people’s reiterated actions.⁶ Third, we must do more than ponder the

sociology of religion about what religion is, and whether one needs an explicit ‘transcendental,’ ‘superempirical’ referent for a belief system to be religious.” Greeley. 1982. *Religion*. New York: Free Press.

3. See note 26 in the introduction.

4. I generally follow Riesebrodt in emphasizing three features of a good definition: “Religious practices should be differentiated as clearly and unambiguously as possible from other kinds of practices. First, this differentiation should be made in such a way that our everyday understanding of religion is not stood on its head; instead, the phenomena that are commonly considered religious should fall under the definition given. Second, the definition should not already contain the explanation of the phenomena. . . . Third, the definition should be compatible with religion’s self-understandings as expressed in their practices.” Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 74.

5. Critical realists distinguish the “transitive” and “intransitive” aspects of science—the transitive being our ideas about real things and the intransitive the real things about which we have ideas. Confusing the two leads to enormous troubles. Here we begin with the intransitive fact of religion being practiced in the real world, regardless of the contingent history of our scholarly conceptualizations of religion. Skeptics might say that we cannot observe “religion” in the real world until we have first settled on a definition of religion. The epistemology presupposed by that view, however, related to a post-Kantian outlook exemplified in strong social constructionism, is one-sided and erroneous. In the development of human knowledge, working through an ongoing hermeneutical spiral, transitive concepts are just as determined by intransitive facts of reality as our understandings of those facts are partly mediated by our concepts about them. Humans can and do observe and make sense of real things happening in the world without pre-defined categories in hand that tell them what those things are. Otherwise, our human knowledge would amount to nothing but our starting-point concepts, and it is hard to explain where they would come from. See Terry Godlove’s effective use of philosopher Donald Davidson to address this question. 2002. “Saving Belief.” In Nancy K. Frankenberry (ed.). *Radical Interpretation in Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 10–24.

6. See Manuel Vasquez. 2010. *More Than Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press; Daniel

various arguments for and against different views of religion. We also need to make *rational judgments* about which approaches seem better and so deserve our assent. We need to choose between the best alternatives and move the discussion forward.⁷

What, then, is religion? *Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad.* The most common of these hopes is to avert misfortunes and receive blessings and deliverance from crises of many kinds; but other, more “spiritual” other-worldly, and sometimes sublime goods and bads are also often part of religious concerns. This definition of religion includes all the concepts that need to be included and avoids all the “accidentals” that ought to be excluded. It is specific and precise where it needs to be, yet also general and inclusive where needed. Let us unpack its meaning, phrase by phrase.

Superhuman powers is the pivotal idea in this definition. “Superhuman” here means that these powers are (believed to be) able to influence or control significant parts of reality that are usually beyond direct human intervention.⁸ That is why humans need their help. Normally these superhuman powers are also not directly observable by human senses. Their sphere of influence may concern personal experiences, human social life, the natural environment, and life after death. Superhuman powers can make happen things that human powers cannot, at least in some situations—that is what makes them *superhuman*. This emphasis on power, on capacities to make things happen or prevent them from happening, is central to the reasons humans have for producing religion.⁹

A second defining feature of “superhuman powers” is that—according to the religious communities that take their existence and nature as prem-

Winchester. 2008. “Embodying the Faith: Religious Practice and the Making of a Moral Habitus.” *Social Forces*. 86: 1753–1780.

7. Per critical realism’s commitment to “judgmental rationality,” described in the introduction.

8. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 75.

9. The centrality of powers also connects directly to critical realism’s and personalism’s emphases on the natural powers and capacities (and incapacities and finitudes) of real entities and persons that do (and in the case of religion are at least believed to) exist as part of reality. In all cases here, the (in)ability of entities to *cause* certain things to happen is central to human life and the interests of scientific understandings of it.

ises—they are *not* human creations.¹⁰ Part of the very superhuman-ness of these religious powers is that they are (believed to be) not dependent upon human invention, activity, or production to exist. People may need to feed, please, or replenish the superhuman powers, but they do not create them.¹¹ This feature is crucial for distinguishing the superhuman powers that define religion from other types of superhuman powers that emerge from human activity but that are not religious. Examples of the latter—which I will call *humanly emergent* superhuman powers—include the Internet, global capitalist markets (“the invisible hand”), and state institutions. These (and nearly every complex human social institution) are “able to influence or control significant parts of reality in ways that are usually beyond direct human intervention”; they possess superhuman powers to exert forces of downward causation on human persons. Humans also engage in various practices to try to access and realize goods from these powers.¹² But the key difference is that they are the products of human design and activity, and so are not powerful in the way that *religious* superhuman powers are.¹³

This definition purposefully avoids the ideas supernatural, transcendent, ultimate, God, gods, spirits, higher beings, holy, numinous, ultimate

10. This was not a point of concern for Riesebrodt, to my knowledge, though important to add here.

11. It would be inaccurate, however, to say religious superhuman powers are always “self-subsistent” or “have their own ground of being,” because some of them (ghosts, angels, saints in heaven, gods described in Hesiod’s *Theogony*) do not have independent existences but are dependent for their being upon other superhuman powers. The most precise way to define religiously superhuman follows Schilbrack: the powers in question must be both not empirical and also not the product of any empirical thing, that is, they must be “superempirical” (and not merely “non-empirical”) (2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell. Pp. 134–135, 139–140).

12. I intentionally use the word “goods” instead of “benefits” in this book to signal its grounding in neo-Aristotelian personalism rather than utilitarian rational choice theory; to suggest the vastly broader range of life (and possibly afterlife or “next-life”) goods than utilitarianism, which ultimately references pleasures and pains, can; and in particular to recognize the many potential perceived goods of subjective religious experiences. Obviously I do not mean only material or consumer goods.

13. This distinction has potential implications for re-conceiving parts of secularization not as the straightforward decline or loss of religion (Taylor’s “subtraction” theory, in Charles Taylor. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap) but instead as the displacement of practices oriented toward religious superhuman powers through a shift by many modern people toward practices devoted (to the point of sometimes being willing to kill and die) to humanly emergent superhuman powers, such as The Nation, The Economy, Science, Capitalism, Communism, and Mass Education. However, this is an admittedly speculative interpretation that is beyond the scope of this book’s argument (but see, for example, William Cavanaugh. 2011. *Migrations of the Holy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

concern, and the sacred, for good reason.¹⁴ Debates about defining religion have taught us that none of these terms are adequate. For example, the idea of “the supernatural” presupposes a distinction between the natural and supernatural; yet some religions do not believe in anything supernatural but instead understand everything in existence as belonging to nature, with even superhuman powers belonging to the natural order of things. A similar problem compromises the idea that religion concerns the “transcendent,” since many human religions have conceived their superhuman powers, the spirits of trees and streams, for instance, as immanent to this reality, not transcending it. Likewise, the idea that religion is about “ultimate” realities or concerns does not work, since many religions are concerned in part—and some are almost wholly concerned—with this-worldly, even mundane issues, like fertile crops and healing sickness, not ultimate things like eternity or “the meaning of life.” God, gods, spirits, and beings are a problem because, again, not all religions believe in a God, gods, spirits, or higher beings. The notion of “the sacred” also fails to demarcate religious things for three reasons: Many things that some people treat as sacred (the nation, golf, shopping, etc.) cannot reasonably be considered religious, not all aspects of all religions are viewed as sacred, and the conceptual opposite of *sacred* is not secular or non-religious but *profane*. Human cultures always involve sacred things, but those things are not always religious.¹⁵ Among all the possible concepts available to define religion, only one captures the crucial feature of all religions, and that is the idea of superhuman powers.

14. Scholars, even after reading Riesebrodt, sometimes still confuse “superhuman” and “supernatural” (and “theistic”)—for example, Ammerman’s critique of “Riesebrodt’s picture of asking *supernatural* forces for assistance” and his focus on “practices . . . oriented . . . to the *supernatural*,” in contrast to “Extra-*theistic*” spiritualities (2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 290, 292, italics added).

15. Defining religion in terms of the sacred also leaves us not only with an unclear, non-intuitive, substantively vacuous account of what “religion” is, but also with the allegedly inescapable condition of “Religious Man,” necessarily expressed in all people, no matter how secular or irreligious they may be. By such a definition, everyone inevitably turns out to be “religious,” one way or another, although religion turns out not to mean much. It then becomes difficult to make sense of real religious decline, of secularization, in cases when that does happen (see chapter 5). Indeed, this last point may help to explain the appeal of “the sacred” for defining religion; it offers one strategy for rescuing religion from the acids of modernity. “This expansion of the concept of religion seems to serve the repression of subjective processes of disenchantment rather than the pursuit of analytical goals. Some people find it easier to broaden the concept of religion to the point of meaninglessness than to admit to themselves and others that they [and many others in society] no longer believe in superhuman powers and their accessibility” (Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 78).

The phrase “whether personal or impersonal” means that the superhuman powers in any given religion may or may not be believed to possess things like consciousness, thoughts, desires, intentions, and feelings. Some superhuman powers may be God, gods, spirits, sprites, ghosts, or demons with properties analogous to those of human persons, such as mind, will, and emotions. But others may be non-conscious forces, energies, or dynamisms, such as a common view of Hinduism’s Brahman, which some humans believe they can tap or align themselves with through religious practices.¹⁶ What kind of causal capacities do impersonal powers possess? Karma, for instance, exercises the inexorable force of causing all actions to be followed by their fitting consequences. The Tao, in some views, is a natural principle, essence, flow, or energy that, when properly known and followed, results in harmony, liberation, and happiness. Dharma operates similarly for many. Which kinds of superhuman powers

16. My approach depends on the idea that some impersonal powers can “act” in the sense of exerting causal forces on human life. Is this idea consistent with the *dharmic* religious traditions associated with many interpretations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism? I believe so, although fully explaining why would require a long chapter, and the matter is complicated by significant internal heterogeneity within many of these traditions, which lack centralized orthodox doctrines. For present purposes, we can briefly note that, according to a common understanding, *Brahman* in Hinduism, for example, is the Ultimate Reality of the cosmos, the highest Universal Principle, the unchanging and uncaused cause of all changes, often thought of as the material, efficient, formal, and final cause of all that exists. Brahman, though impersonal, thus acts in and upon life and the world causally. Because of ignorance and desire, many in this tradition believe, human existence is also subject to the powers of *samsara*, the repeated cycles of reincarnation. *Karma*, too, is an impersonal force or principle of cause and effect that determines future states of existence according to past and present actions, and so is fundamentally about active causality and the governing of good and bad human outcomes, which religious practices intend to influence. By aligning oneself with these truths and powers of reality and living according to *dharma*, a virtuous, proper, and moral life, the religious practitioner can move toward the liberation of *moksha* or nirvana. Although these superhuman powers are impersonal, their traditions still fit this definition of religion well. One might next ask then why gravity, an impersonal superhuman power arguably not absolutely unlike Brahman in some respects, does not count as religious. The answer is that (a) people do not view gravity as a power that can be communicated or aligned with through the exercise of culturally prescribed practices; (b) people readily view gravity (whether they theoretically understand it or not) as a natural *condition of the possibility of* misfortunes (spills, falls, drowning) and not a superhuman power capable of preventing them; and (c) no human community or tradition has developed prescribed complexes of practices to help people align with the power of gravity so as to obtain blessings and receive deliverance from crises. Gravity is thus an impersonal superhuman power, yes, but not the object of a religion. Usually, in fact, when humans do make natural superhuman powers religiously significant—for example, the sun or mountains—those powers are *personified*, as being or representing gods or spirits.

religious practitioners seek to access, whether personal or impersonal, depends on what their practices assume about them.

Religion consists in part of *a complex of culturally prescribed practices*. “Practices” are culturally meaningful behaviors that are intentionally repeated over time, such as making yearly offerings to the spirits of one’s ancestors or praying every night before going to sleep. All four of those elements—meaning, behavior, intentionality, and repetition—must be present in the activity (though not necessarily in the mind of the practitioner, as I suggest below) to count as a genuine practice.¹⁷ One person’s mindless behavioral habit, such as repeatedly scratching his chin, is not a true practice by this account, since it is not culturally prescribed, is hardly intentional, and has no broader cultural meaning.

Religions are formed from networks of practices grouped together into complexes. A single practice does not make a religion. One does not simply burn some incense or read the passage of a text and thereby have a religion. Religions are composed of conglomerations of interrelated practices, sometimes so many that it takes a lifetime to learn to perform them well. Each of the practices has its own meaning, and each usually adds extra meaning to the others in the larger complex of practices to which they belong. Take a simple example: Folding one’s hands for prayer and speaking the words of a prayer are distinct religious practices, neither of which absolutely requires the other. But when they are combined, each enriches the meaning of the other: The folded hands enact a reverence that is appropriate to the prayer and the prayer provides an expressive purpose with content for the folded hands. The combined meaning is more than the sum of its parts. Complexes of religious practices, which are part of even the simplest of religions, thus generate synergies and experiences that individual practices alone do not.

Practices, by this account, also need to be specified and commended by some culture or tradition.¹⁸ Religious practices are never random, idiosyncratic, or arbitrary. If they were, then they could not be meaningful. They would simply be the strange doings of odd people. Religious practices are always culturally prescribed. The stipulations may cover *which* practices to perform; *how* to perform them correctly; and *when, where, and in what situations* to perform them. Often only certain people—shamans, mediums,

17. Making practices central to religion makes it “a *humanistic* definition of religion, in the sense that it does not exclude human agency or conscious aims” (Schilbrack. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. P. 122, italics added).

18. See the important clarification on the question of persons, not social units, as actors in the section Terminological and Other Clarifications later in this chapter.

priests, ordained clergy, laypersons—are allowed to engage in particular practices. In addition, some religious practices are prescribed to be undertaken by individuals, some by groups, and some by entire nations or societies.¹⁹ Some religious practices are meant to be enacted once in a lifetime, while others are expected to be sustained over a period of time or even an entire life. Still other practices are supposed to add up to one whole, comprehensive way of life. Institutionalized cultural orders or systems thus always tell practitioners when and how to repeat the meaningful actions correctly, and who may repeat them. If a practice is not conducted properly by the right person, then it is often considered invalid and ineffective. This is why religions are almost invariably social activities—communities of memory engaged in carrying on particular traditions (figure 1.1).²⁰ In fact, in the absence of inherited historical traditions, most new religious movements simply *invent* them as needed.²¹ Communal memory and the authority of historical tradition give religions some of their formative power, but because it is difficult to transmit practices faithfully across generations, they also make religious continuity challenging to sustain over time.

A long tradition in the sociology of religion, reflected in the theory of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, among others, has insisted on a sharp distinction between religion and magic. In this view, religion is by definition a social fact, socially constituted and practiced, and therefore requiring collective practices to exist. Magic, by contrast, is thought to be a different species of human activity, partly because it is often an asocial practice performed by individual clients for instrumental, personal reasons, rather than taking place socially as a matter of group solidarity. Making this

19. Some studies of religion talk about religious “rituals” more than “practices.” How, in this theory, are these two concepts related? While they are similar in nature, “practices” serves as a more general and inclusive term than “rituals.” Practices I define broadly as culturally meaningful behaviors that are intentionally repeated over time. Rituals, by comparison, usually signify prescribed rites, ceremonies, or proceedings conducted in stipulated forms and sequences that are distinguished by their relative solemnity, formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance quality (Catherine Bell. 1997. *Ritual*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 138–169). Not all rituals feature all of these characteristics, but that is the ideal type. Practices, while reflecting some of these qualities, can be more diverse, informal, and irregular. All rituals are practices, but not all practices are rituals. And so not all activities in which religious practitioners engage to access superhuman powers are or need to be rituals.

20. Daniele Hervieu-Leger. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

21. James Lewis and Olav Hammer (eds.). 2011. *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Nicholas Roberts. 2015. *Political Islam and the Invention of Tradition*. Washington, DC: New Academic.



FIGURE 1.1. An adult Christian believer is baptized by church leaders via total immersion in a river near the village of Nyombe, Malawi, Africa. Baptism by water is a central religious practice in most Christian traditions. (Copyright: Joseph Project—Malawi / Alamy Stock Photo)

distinction between religion and magic was necessary for Durkheim and his followers because they believed that religion is the collective representation of that which a community considers to be sacred about itself.²² But this distinction does not matter for us. The collective performance of practices is not an essential feature of religion, by my account; nor is Durkheim's emphasis on the sacred. Magic can and usually does involve "complexes of culturally prescribed practices" oriented toward superhuman powers, as this book's definition specifies. So, following Riesebrodt,²³ I see no need to divorce religion and magic conceptually. When magic is practiced in ways that fit the definition of religion advanced here, then it belongs to religion.

One could never enumerate a comprehensive list of religious practices. However, it is possible to compile a list of various practices from religious traditions past and present, both common and unusual. Such a list is compiled in no particular order in table 1.1. Later I try to sort these specific practices into some major types.

Linking the practices just discussed and the superhuman powers discussed earlier is the phrase *based on premises about*. Practices are culturally

22. Durkheim and Karen Fields (transl.). 1995. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

23. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 78.

TABLE 1.1. The Variety of Religious Practices

Animal sacrifice	Observing holy days	Hanging images on walls
Scripture reading	Processions	Self-flagellation
Communal fellowship	Conducting crusades	Consecrating objects
Observing sacred laws	Requesting prayer support	Coming forward down an aisle
Human sacrifice	Practicing pacifism	Using prayer beads
Sharing sacred meals	Visiting shrines	Memorizing scripture
Hospitality	Praying to ancestors	Divination
Wearing amulets or talismans	Venerating sacred objects	Observing dietary restrictions
Plant harvest sacrifice	Constructing monuments	Conducting funerals
Reciting mantras	Kneeling	Making sacred art
Sacred dancing	Keeping silence	Walking labyrinths
Observing rites of passage	Receiving visions or apparitions	Preserving bodies of the dead
Spoken prayers	Giving public testimony	Reciting oral histories
Giving alms	Laying on hands	Venerating animals
Lighting candles	Closing one's eyes	Using hallucinogens
Observing sacred calendrical times	Folding hands	Retelling sacred narratives
Spirit possession	Raising arms	Offering food to priests
Fasting from food	Trusting a divinity	Ritual sexual acts
Burning incense	Waving plant branches	Feeding spirits
Making offerings	Obeying divine commands	Observing dietary restrictions
Meditation	Holy kisses	Covering body parts
Sexual abstinence	Political blessings	Revering names of deities
Blessings of fields	Housing divine statues	Ritual breathing exercises
Consulting oracles	Contemplating icons	Abstaining from unclean words
Pilgrimages	Spiritual journaling	Ritual physical exercises
Ritual water on skin	Phallus worship	Avoiding taking any life
Blessings of houses	Spiritual direction	Renunciation of clothing
Conducting exorcisms	Ordination for office	Reenacting cosmic mythologies
Singing worship songs	Spinning prayer wheels	Pastoral discipline
Studying sacred texts	Reciting the Rosary	Water purification rites
Blessings of marriages	Penance	Casting of spells
Celebrating festivals	Attending religious services	Refusal of professional medicine
Water baptism	Confession of sin	Pronouncing of curses
Proselytizing	Believing the gospel	Positioning talismans
Genuflecting	Ashes on forehead	Coloring bodies
Wearing prescribed clothing	Endowing religious houses	Burning dedicated objects
Prostration	Praying to patron saints	Keeping vigils
Religious conversion	Buying indulgences	Pouring libations
Taking oaths	Teaching religion	Eucharistic adoration
Celebrating worship liturgies	Performing sacred dramas	Family visits with ancestors present

prescribed and performed because of presuppositions about the existence and nature of superhuman powers that those practices are meant to access. If the superhuman powers were not believed to be able to influence matters of interest, their help would not be sought. The point here is simply that the imperative to perform practices references beliefs that some superhuman powers exist and have capacities for causal influence that humans can access through certain practices.²⁴

We see, then, that, while the definition of religion developed by Riesebrodt and being advanced here is clearly centered on practice, it does not overlook the importance of religious beliefs. Religious practices are based on religious premises, and premises are beliefs of a certain kind. There is no religion without some beliefs. The beliefs need not be central to religion, or to its academic study, but they cannot be excluded, either. The role of beliefs in religion is also entailed in the very notion of practices itself. Practices are culturally meaningful behaviors intentionally repeated over time. For behaviors to be culturally meaningful, some beliefs must be operative. Meaning is more than beliefs, but it always depends upon some beliefs. Belief-less meanings do not exist (even if the emotional sensations that often accompany meanings do). And so, to initiate some religious practice, some people at some time must hold some beliefs. But even beyond that, the motivation to carry out practices presupposes a purpose for them. The presupposition of religious practices specifically is some premises about the existence of some superhuman powers that those practices aim to access. Thus, some beliefs are essential to religion's constitution, even if, again, they are not central to its performance and study.

Religious practices are also not prescribed aimlessly but have a definite central purpose: *They seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with the postulated superhuman powers.*²⁵ This purpose should be broadly construed to include steps like making contact with,

24. The premises here refer only to beliefs about the superhuman powers, their existence and natures, not about larger worldviews or complete cultural systems.

25. My definition from here onward (the "which seeks to" and "in hopes of" parts) includes what Riesebrodt considers the distinct matter of "explaining" religion. He would say that my definition violates his second criterion of a good definition: it "should not already contain the explanation of the phenomena" (74), in order for explanations to be falsifiable. The transcendental realism in critical realism (see Roy Bhaskar. 1997. *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Verso), however, justifies this move in a way that the transcendental idealism of Riesebrodt's post-Kantian Weberianism does not. My definition says that religion's purpose—accessing superhuman powers—*itself partly constitutes religion*, and is not merely one possible account of why religions exist and act, so it belongs in the conceptualization of religion's ontology. My definition

sustaining a relationship with, attuning oneself to, learning the will of, worshipping, attempting to manipulate, winning the attention of, honoring, pleasing, appeasing, feeding, bargaining with, and more. Which purpose is being pursued will vary by the religious tradition, the prescribed practices, and the nature of the presupposed powers. For this theory it is important to grasp that religious practices are not simply initiations of offers to make exchanges. Practices come in many forms and embody and express various modes of communication, interactions, and relations with superhuman powers. Exchange is only one of those possible modes, and in some religious traditions it is not emphasized. Religious practices in some traditions can just as well seek to foster connections to superhuman powers characterized by love and gratuitous gift-giving or pure spiritual well-being.

I intentionally include both “communicate with” and “align themselves with” in order to accommodate both religions with personal superhuman powers *and* those with impersonal superhuman powers. It is hard to imagine communicating with a force or power that is impersonal. Some religious traditions do not postulate personal gods or spirits, but instead affirm superhuman powers, forces, or dynamics, such as Brahman or karma. It is better to describe the practices of these religions as seeking to attune or align practitioners to or with these impersonal superhuman powers than to say they intend to “communicate” with them. For this reason, I added the phrase “align themselves with” to my definition.

These observations about premises and beliefs raise crucial questions about exactly *who* needs to believe for the practices to be religious. Do religious practitioners at any point in time or always need to believe the premises for their performances to count as religious? Must they always understand and agree with the content of the beliefs on which their practices are premised? What if they do not understand, or they dissent from, the religious tradition and practices? Can some people believe on behalf of others? The account I am advancing suggests the following answer.

Religious practitioners do not need to be aware of the cultural meanings of their repeated actions for them to count as real practices.²⁶ At times, practices can be performed mindlessly or while distracted. In some cases,

remains open to criticism and invalidation, of course, just as much as Riesebrodt’s “explaining” religion remains falsifiable.

26. Schilbrack. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. P. 121; Michaelis Michael and John Paul Heady. 2012. “A Guru-Disciple Tradition: Can Religious Conversion Be Non-Cognitive?” In Morgan Luck (ed.). *Philosophical Explorations of New and Alternative Religious Movements*. Surrey: Ashgate. Pp. 77–95.

certain practitioners, such as young children, may have no idea about the meanings of their repeated actions. Specific religious practitioners also need not authentically believe in the premises and cultural meanings behind the practices they perform, in the sense of personally affirming the ideas as true.²⁷ Some people participate in the religious celebrations of Easter and Passover, for instance, who do not personally hold to the historical and theological claims that make those observances religiously meaningful. What matters is not that every practitioner is aware of and truly believes in the culturally meaningful premises of every practice, but rather that *the practice itself* is institutionalized in a complex of repeated actions that are culturally meaningful in religious terms, that is, oriented toward gaining access to superhuman powers. That distinction is important.

The *meanings* of religious practices as conceptualized here, in other words, derive not from the cognitive assent of the people engaged in them at any given time but from a variety of institutional sources, including historical traditions, sacred texts, and explanations by religious specialists. Religious practices are social realities irreducible to the beliefs of the people who enact them. Beyond the subjective experiences of practitioners, they involve various more or less objective “externalized” forms, such as prayer books, ritual dances, candles, the retelling of stories, and the slaughtering of animals—which Riesebrodt calls “supra-individual, objective levels of religion.”²⁸ To count as a genuine religious practice, the repeated actions in some way need to be connected to an account of their cultural meaning.²⁹ Somebody somewhere needs to be able to explain at least some of the

27. Many people end up holding religious beliefs that are inconsistent with the teachings they are supposed to accept according to the prescriptions of their religious traditions, such that, to a significant degree, “theology doesn’t determine people’s actual thoughts and behaviors.” D. Jason Sloan. 2004. *Theologically Incorrect*. New York: Oxford University Press. P. 4; Justin Barrett. 1999. “Theological Correctness.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. 11: 325–339.

28. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 88.

29. So when discreet religious practices are removed from the larger complex of practices of which they were originally a part, and performed in institutions whose cultures involve no premises about superhuman powers, then they may cease being religious practices, despite their religious origins. Examples of this phenomenon include undertaking the originally Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain disciplines of yoga in exercise classes at secular health clubs for purely health reasons, and singing sacred choral music in an ensemble of a secular community music association. Riesebrodt argues that people simply performing religious behaviors does not mean that they are actually doing religion: “People can act religiously without practicing a religion. Someone who practices Zen meditation on Mondays, turns tables on Tuesdays, lays out Tarot cards on Thursdays, and goes to Mass on Sundays is performing religious acts, but the systematic connection among them is lacking. If this connection is produced only subjectively [within one person], if it is not shared

religious significance of the actions. But there are many ways for that to happen; it does not require all or even any of the practitioners at any given time to understand and affirm the truth of their premises for those actions to be religious. Also, practitioners can engage their religions even while disagreeing with, transgressing, or maintaining a distance from the established beliefs and practices. They may do so in hopes of seeking the truth, bearing witness to fellow practitioners, spurring reform of their religion, or fostering greater inclusion.

In any actual performance of a religious practice, different participants may undertake the same actions for different purposes—from repenting from wrongdoing, to conforming to group norms, to looking for an escape from boredom. However, as we seek to understand religion *theoretically*, our key point of reference, to repeat, must be the *culturally prescribed purposes and meanings* of the practices, not primarily the subjective interests or motives of the people performing them. Religious practices are to be performed, according to this book’s definition, to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with superhuman powers. That specifies the purposes or objectives of the practices. But here these objectives must be understood as *those of the cultures and traditions that prescribe the religious practices*, not the subjective intentions of the particular practitioners. The necessary theoretical starting place for understanding religion is *what a religious culture or tradition says those practices mean and intends its practices to achieve*.³⁰ The subjective intentions and attitudes of religious practitioners are of course very important, and they matter hugely in the study of religiousness. But for the purpose of defining religion theoretically, the subjective intentions of practitioners are not the key reference point.³¹ Whether and when gaps may exist between the “official” intentions of the practices and the subjective purposes of the

with and confirmed by others, then these practices lack the social character of a religion” (Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 76). But the line when such a practice becomes definitely not religious can be unclear.

30. Riesebrodt’s discussion on this point is helpful, though he uses the term “liturgies” here more than practices (*Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 84–89).

31. “It is ill conceived to construe the object of the study of religion to be the inner experience of religious practitioners. Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth” (Robert Sharf. 1998. “Experience.” In Mark Taylor (ed.). *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 94–116). Some of Sharf’s arguments I think are confused and would be helped by a dose of critical realism, but his historicist and epistemological problematizing of religious experience merits consideration.

practitioners in any instance is an *empirical* question, one often worth investigating—but one that is not essential for clarifying our *conceptual definition* of religion.

For example, suppose we observe a religious congregation reciting from a prayer book a prayer for protection from evil. What matters for our purpose of defining religion is that the authors of the prayers, the tradition that adheres to that prayer book, and the culture that prescribes the recitation of those prayers—in short, the religious institution—mean those prayers to be offered to a superhuman power in hopes of receiving their protection from evil. That is the essential element for defining this activity as being part of religion. Whether the members of the congregation who are reciting the prayer actually believe in or fear evil is an analytically separate issue. Some may and some may not. But that does not matter for the purpose of *defining* religion. What matters is that the culture, the tradition, the institution prescribing the prayers delineate and intend them to be seeking to access a superhuman power in order to ward off evil. Particular religious people do often practice religion in hopes of gaining the aid of superhuman powers, more than many realize or admit. But their motivations are also subjective and potentially highly variable, sometimes even partly unconscious. Attempting to define religion theoretically by referencing practitioners' subjectivities is a misguided enterprise.³² By contrast, the intended meanings of religious cultures, traditions, and institutions are more or less objective, public, and focused, and so provide firmer grounds for conceptualizing a definition of religion.³³ Empirically—that is, what we can observe about people's actual practicing of religions—what religious institutions prescribe and why people practice religions are nearly always coupled, but we often observe only a "loose coupling," not a tight fit. Our theoretical account of religion needs to account for that loose coupling. Again, an interest in understanding the subjective motives of religious people is entirely valid and often necessary. But that shifts our attention away from defining *religion* analytically—what we are trying to do in this chapter—and toward studying

32. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 82–84.

33. By analogy, "we understand a play or an opera not by interviewing actors, singers, musicians, or spectators but by grasping the meaning of the action . . . as expressed above all in the texts spoken or sung, in the sets and the staging, in the actors' gestures and mimicry. It is also determined primarily by the author, composer, and director, not by scholars or critics. In other words, the 'subjectively intended meaning' of religious action should not be interpreted subjectivistically. Rather, it is constituted in each case in the context of an institutionalized social and cultural meaning" (Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 83).

religiousness empirically, a key distinction (discussed just below) that we need to grasp and maintain.

Presupposed by this need to communicate or align oneself with superhuman powers through prescribed religious practices is the belief that the powers they are directed toward are not automatically or continually accessible or perhaps attentive to the religious practitioners; or perhaps that humans are easily out of alignment with those powers. In some cases, this is because the superhuman powers are believed to exist in a completely different realm of being, on another plane of existence, and reaching them requires breaking through a barrier or bridging a gap. In other cases, they are thought to require some mode of communication other than ordinary human speech. Sometimes the superhuman powers in question are believed to be so superior in mind, capabilities, or moral perfection that the limitations or corruptions of ordinary human life make them inaccessible in any way other than the prescribed mediating rituals. Then again, the superhuman powers may be considered so slippery, untrustworthy, or malign that particular practices are necessary to corner, pacify, or subdue them for human purposes. Some superhuman powers are thought capable of depletion, hunger, anger, or greed, and so need to be fed, appeased, or rewarded before or while being approached. Finally, in some religions, the superhuman powers (often viewed as impersonal in these cases, such as karma) are believed to operate with such an unyielding consistency of consequences or justice that the religious practices are necessary not to sway the superhuman powers but to bring human consciousness and behavior into sync with the workings of the invariable cosmic order or natural law that the superhuman power defines.

At the same time, nothing in this theory assumes that the superhuman powers that religious practices access are necessarily hostile, difficult, or resistant. They need not be greedy or self-seeking. In some religious traditions, the believed-in superhuman powers are gracious, loving, merciful, forgiving, benevolent, and always ready to hear and respond to the entreaties of their people. Some superhuman powers are more than ready, willing, and able to provide blessings and deliverance. The real difficulty in such cases, according to these traditions' accounts, is not the disposition of the superhuman powers, but humanity's aversion to properly acknowledging and honoring them. Even so, no matter how benevolent and accessible a superhuman power may be believed to be, religious people still perform some practices prescribed by their religious cultures to approach and interact with that power properly. Never are those relations conceived to be

automatic, continual, or guaranteed. Religious practitioners in their “natural habitats” may not always recognize that this is what they are doing, but that is nonetheless (from an etic perspective) what is going on.

Why do religious cultures prescribe practices for people to access and communicate or align themselves with superhuman powers? And why do many (though not all) people often perform those practices? It is *in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding bads, especially avoiding misfortune and receiving blessings and deliverance from crises*. (Elsewhere³⁴ I explain more thoroughly, and in the section “Why Are Humans Religious?” in chapter 4 of this text I summarize, my personalist account of motivating basic and non-basic human goods and bads; readers unfamiliar with personalist theory, however, can instead begin by thinking in terms of “what *people in particular cultures consider* to be good and bad for humans.”) At root, humans approach superhuman powers for help in conditions and situations they cannot control and with problems that they cannot solve. Generally, when people are able to resolve their difficulties in a reasonable amount of time using ordinary, human means, they do so and leave the superhuman powers alone. But very often it happens in life that people cannot address or cope with problems with their own limited resources. Humans also often wish to have extra help, redundancies of assurance, and backup plans for matters that they can only partly control. Religion exists and in part attracts adherents because it promises people the help of superhuman powers to respond to problems, both small and enormous, immediate and perhaps eternal, that they believe they cannot solve themselves. *That is not all religion does, nor is it the only reason people are religious*, as we will see below. But realizing goods and avoiding bads, especially averting misfortune, obtaining blessings, and receiving deliverance from crises through superhuman means, are religion’s core purpose, its ultimate *raison d’être*.³⁵ When that central purpose withers, whether for reasons internal or external to religion, then, I suggest, over time religion tends to wither, too.

The list of concerns for which people seek to access the help of superhuman powers is as long as all possible human frailties, vulnerabilities, hopes, anxieties, and inadequacies. Riesebrodt notes that “blessings and misfortune can be found in three domains: nature, the human body, and social relations.”³⁶ Dimensions of salvation and misfortune are, he observes,

34. Smith. *To Flourish or Destruct*.

35. Even, ironically, when the stated purpose of a religious practice aims at purposelessness or inactivity.

36. Riesebrodt. *The Promise of Salvation*. P. 90. “With regard to nature, the focus is on such

the natural environment of humans, the human body, and interpersonal relations. Thus, for instance, disease and hunger, suffering and pain, need and repression, persecution and expulsion, flood and drought, war and annihilation are generally seen as misfortune, whereas health and abundance, successful hunts, fertility and large harvests, peace and social harmony are seen as blessings. In addition, there are transcendent expectations of salvation that transpose earthly blessings and misfortunes to another level. Here, for the saved, there are no disasters, no crises, no misfortune. They enjoy an eternal state of bliss. In contrast, for the damned or the souls that find no peace, a temporary or eternal state of suffering, pain, and torment is expected.

The latter, of course, only applies to religions that posit conscious existence with possible judgment and reward after death. But blessings can be very immediate, subjective, and positive too, such as enjoying a relationship with God and experiencing God's mercy, forgiveness, and love.

I must repeat a point made above. Religious cultures prescribe practices by which practitioners might realize human goods and avoid bads, such as avoiding misfortune and receiving blessings and deliverance from crises. That does not imply, however, that the means or processes by which that might happen are always instrumental exchanges between humans and superhuman powers. Religious practices come in many varieties and can produce possible effects (as explained by the religious traditions that prescribe them) through diverse means. Only one of those means involves mutually beneficial, tit-for-tat, quid pro quo exchange. Other religious practices offer the promise of goods through cultivated relations with personal superhuman powers that are understood to be irreducibly benevolent, gracious, tender, unmerited, uncalculated, and gratuitous. And in religions involving non-personal superhuman powers, exchange is simply impossible—one cannot broker an exchange with an impersonal force, principle, or power, like the Tao or karma. Through the right practices one either aligns oneself with them or not. Thus, the “in hopes of” part of this book's definition of religion should not be assumed to only involve transactional exchanges.

forces as thunderstorms, earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions, invasion of locusts, disappearing game herds, or epidemics. With regard to the human body, the themes of reproduction and mortality—fertility and birth, disease and death—are dominant. Social crises that become the object of religious practices are often closely connected with questions of social superiority or inferiority and with changes in social status. Such crises may concern domination, conflict and sanction, initiation, marriage, and death” (p. 90).

Critics of religion have at times alleged that religion is only about assuaging the fear of death by promising life after death. Some scholars have emphasized overcoming death as religion's essence.³⁷ Such views are inadequate. No limited set of concerns exists that religion specializes in addressing. Religions can and do engage *every* human concern, anxiety, hope, weakness, and calamity possible. No gain or burden, no dream or catastrophe, either possible or actual, present or future is beyond religion's capacity to address.³⁸ Consider, for instance, the practice of prayer (shifting now from the focus on religion to religiousness). People sometimes pray for automobile parking spaces to open up for them on busy days. Sometimes they pray to win the lottery. People pray for the miraculous physical healing of diseases. They pray for their children who are struggling with bullying in school. People pray for rain so their crops prosper, for wisdom or patience, for the end of addictions. They pray for political justice in their nations, to be received into eternal life, to avoid the damnation of hellfire. They pray to remember the correct answers on exams or to not be caught for stealing or lying. And some pray about haircuts and what to wear.³⁹

Of course, some religions encourage a focus on certain kinds of misfortunes and blessings while ignoring others. Certain religions attend primarily to getting practitioners into heaven, while others do not even believe in life after death. Some religious practices are concerned with averting the curses of malevolent spirits or the "evil eye" enemies have imposed on them, while others seek to enhance mental and emotional happiness and well-being. Some appeal to superhuman powers for victory in war, others to bring much-needed peace and reconciliation. Many people just hope that God will grant them some support and serenity. Exactly which concerns

37. For example, "religion . . . is the result of two incurable diseases from which humankind suffers: life, from which we die; and hope, which hints that there may be more meaning to life than a termination in death. Humankind . . . is the only being of which we are aware that is conscious of its own mortality and is capable of hoping that death is not the final fact in human life. Thus, religion becomes possible when a being is conscious of the inevitability of its own death and becomes inevitable when the being has experiences that suggest that death does not have the final word." Andrew Greeley. 1995. *Religion as Poetry*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. P. 26.

38. Recognizing this important "everyday" feature of religions, a recent wave of scholarship has shifted attention away from the official and dramatic and toward the ordinary aspects of religion. See Thomas Tweed. 2015. "After the Quotidian Turn." *Journal of Religion*. 95: 361–385; Nancy Ammerman. 2007. *Everyday Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press; Meredith McGuire. 2008. *Lived Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press; Courtney Bender. 2003. *Heaven's Kitchen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

39. T. M. Luhrmann. 2012. *When God Talks Back*. New York: Vintage. Pp. 76–77, 94; Katharine Wiegman. 2004. *Investing in Miracles*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

tend to occupy the practitioners of different religions depends largely on the interaction of religions' inherited beliefs about reality in general and their superhuman powers specifically with the kind of problems people typically face in any given historical and social setting. Practices are most likely commensurate with the blessings and troubles that most concern people in particular social circumstances, and with those that their religions, by virtue of their premises, are best suited to address. Few Catholics living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan pray fervently for demonic exorcisms, just as few Pentecostals in sub-Saharan Africa pray for inner peace on days that the stock market is jittery.

Even so, humans everywhere seem to rely on religion to address certain concerns more frequently than others. And most religions are responses to these common concerns. These tend to be matters that confront all people at some time and that humans have severely limited capacities to avoid or resolve. Prime among these concerns are damaging accidents to body and spirit, misfortunes in the sphere of earning a living, bodily sickness, and death. No humans can avoid the last two events and few humans are fortunate enough to avoid the first two their entire lives. Even those with especially charmed lives may still be troubled by anxiety about the possibility of calamities that never befall them. Fortune brings worries of its own.⁴⁰ Apprehensive expectations and sustained hopes can motivate religious practices just as well as the suffering of actual problems. On the matter of death, having one's soul turned away from the halls of venerable ancestors upon one's passing because of an improper burial, or spending an eternity in hell because of sins one never repented of, or being reborn an "untouchable" or an animal in the next life because of bad karma are clearly disasters from which one would seek deliverance, assuming one believes the premises underlying those possibilities. Even in religions that do not posit an afterlife, practitioners may share the widely felt human concern to avoid death at an early age and eventually to die in peace rather than in suffering and disgrace.

In theory, religion is concerned with both goods and bads, blessing and misfortune, positives and negatives. But different religions vary in their emphasis on the positive versus the negative. Some are primarily about health, wealth, and happiness. Others are consulted primarily when trouble strikes. How and why religions differ in these ways and their results for human lives

40. Graeme Wood. 2011. "The Secret Fears of the Super Rich." *The Atlantic*. April. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/04/secret-fears-of-the-super-rich/308419/>.

are matters for empirical investigation. Furthermore, the motivations to gain something good versus to avoid something bad operate with different intensities and dynamics. A large body of research shows that, across most domains of life, negative prospects, experiences, images, and memories generally have more powerful effects on human motivation and cognition than positive ones.⁴¹ Psychologists call this a “negativity bias.” Economists observe a related tendency that they call “loss aversion,” which is people’s propensity to prefer avoiding losses over acquiring gains—with most studies showing that losses are twice as psychologically powerful as gains.⁴² This variation may be influenced by whether the positive and negative results are viewed as short-term or long-run prospects. Similarly, motivations to engage in different kinds of religious practices with different goals will likely vary by social class, types of people, and religious traditions (figure 1.2). However, we have good reason to expect that religious practitioners are generally more motivated to engage in practices seeking to avoid, relieve, and cope with misfortune and crisis than they are to attain blessings and other positive outcomes. But these are open empirical questions requiring research. So, too, does the question of differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivations—that is, performing religious practices in order to achieve some external good or simply because the practices themselves have become intrinsically rewarding (for both of which this book’s theory can account).⁴³

41. Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen Vohs. 2001. “Bad Is Stronger than Good.” *Review of General Psychology*. 5: 323–370; Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman. 2001. “Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 5: 296–320; Kelly Goldsmith and Ravi Dhar. 2013. “Negativity Bias and Task Motivation.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 19: 358–366; Tiffany Ito and John Cacioppo. 2005. “Variations on a Human Universal.” *Cognition and Emotion*. 19: 1–26.

42. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. 1992. “Advances in Prospect Theory.” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*. 5: 297–323; Ido Erev, Eyal Ert, and Eldad Yechiam. 2008. “Loss Aversion, Diminishing Sensitivity, and the Effect of Experience on Repeated Decisions.” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*. 21: 575–597.

43. Some readers may be tempted to think of mine as a broadly “functional” definition of religion, that is, one that determines what religion is by what religion distinctively does, by the social or psychological functions it serves (in contrast with substantive definitions that focus not on what religion uniquely does but on its unique substantive content). True enough, this chapter’s definition does zero in on the central activity of religion: realizing human goods and avoiding bads, especially offering superhuman help with blessings, misfortunes, and crises. To that extent, it does involve a functional *dimension*—though one that is centered on the goods of *persons*, not “society” or mere psychology. But that does not make mine an essentially functional definition. Purely functional definitions of religion are doomed to vagueness and failure. My account of what religion does is more concerned with motives for producing and practicing religion than the



FIGURE 1.2. Celebrating the Hindu festival of Diwali, the “Festival of Lights,” families bring food offerings to the gods in their Hindu center. The food is displayed before the gods prior to ceremonies and prayers, candles are lit, and the passing of flames from one candle to another is believed to bring good luck. (Copyright: Awesome Cardiff)

To clarify one last central point about this definition of religion: Religion is not most fundamentally a cognitive or existential *meaning system*. Rather, it is essentially a set of *practices* aimed at accomplishing things that humans consider to be good and avoiding bads. Some cultural meaning system is necessary to tell religious people what religious practices to perform, how to perform them, and why they are to be performed. But “making meaning” is not the heart of religion, not by this account. The heart is undertaking practices to realize goods and avoid bads, especially obtaining blessings and avoiding and coping with misfortunes and crises. That shifts this theory away from the dominant theme of theories of religion during much of the last century—that is, religion as a cultural meaning system⁴⁴—

social functions religion serves (see Riesebrodt, *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 72–74); and more central to my definition of religion than the “function” of solving people’s problems is its focus on superhuman powers and the human practices that seek to access them. In Schilbrack’s terms, mine is a “dithetic” definition of religion (*Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. Pp. 115–121).

44. Clifford Geertz. 1973. “Religion as a Cultural System.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 87–125; Max Weber. 1978. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 399–634; Talcott Parsons. 1928–1929. “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature.” *Journal of Political Economy*. 36–37: 31–51; Talcott Parsons. 1979. “Religious and Economic Symbolism in the Western World.” *Sociological Inquiry*. 49: 1–48.

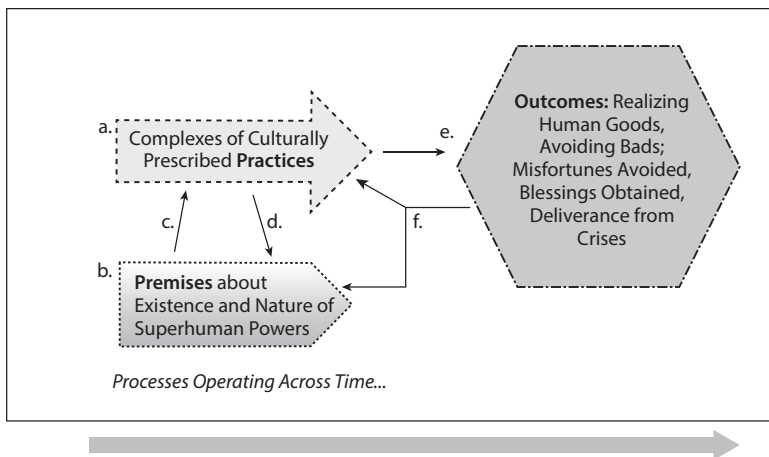


FIGURE 1.3. Schematic representation of religion's ontology

and toward a focus on practices performed, activities engaged, and their desired results.⁴⁵

Having pulled apart, elaborated on, and illustrated a particular definition of religion, we can now put it back together, as represented schematically in figure 1.3. The large arrow shapes are meant to denote active processes performed in time, while the dashed lines are meant to suggest the semi-permeability and openness to change across time of each of the elements in question. The letters attached to arrows (a, b, c, etc.) indicate the distinct analytical aspects of the model, beginning with the priority of practices.

Types of Religious Practices

Religions prescribe many kinds of practices. Martin Riesebrodt identifies three distinct major types:⁴⁶

1. *Interventionist practices*: These could involve “establishing contact in the sense of manipulation . . . for example, by wearing amulets or performing ‘magical’ acts”; “temporary interaction or even fusion with superhuman powers, as experienced in mystical trance and ascetic ecstasy”; or “activating superhuman potential that slumbers

45. Bush. *Visions of Religion*.

46. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 75–76; also see pp. 85–87.

within a person, includ[ing] practices of self-empowerment through contemplation and ‘enlightenment’ experienced thereby.” This type includes *symbolic actions* facilitating “interaction [with superhuman powers through figurative activities] such as prayers, chants, gestures, formulas, sacrifices, vows, or divination.

2. *Behavior-regulating practices*: These “pertain to the religious reshaping of everyday life with respect to superhuman powers” and “usually concern the avoidance of sanctions or the accumulation of merits. . . . Such regulations regarding behavior are, however, valid as a religious practice only when they occur in accord with the will, the principles, or the sanctions of superhuman powers.”⁴⁷
3. *Discursive practices*: These refer to “interpersonal communication regarding the nature, status, or accessibility of superhuman powers, their manipulability, and their will, as well as techniques of self-empowerment. Discursive practices hand down and revise religious knowledge concerning interventionist practices and stand in a dialectical relationship with that knowledge. They are the foundation of religious interpretive cultures. Theology also falls under this rubric and should not be seen as limited to an academic discipline and intellectuals.”

The lines between these categories are not always sharp, but these analytical distinctions help us to sort out divergent types of religious practices. According to Riesebrodt, social science should, for logical and methodological reasons, privilege interventionist practices over behavior-regulating and discursive practices in its theorizing.⁴⁸

Riesebrodt also distinguishes different kinds of “general practices,” which are “interventionist practices in which virtually all members of a religious community can or should participate.” These include (1) *calendrical practices*, the observing of religious calendars that mark time, typically,

47. “They deal with such matters as how people should treat one another; what, when, and with whom they may eat; at what times and places they should carry out, or avoid, certain actions; how they should bury their dead. . . . In an intensified form, behavior-regulating practices can also assume the meaning of interventionist practices, for example, when they are interpreted as communication with superhuman powers or as a strategy of self-empowerment. Ethical behavior or the intensive study of sacred texts can be interpreted as a form of religious service and thus take on the quality of an interventionist practice” (p. 76).

48. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 85–87—which relates to the point just made about meaning-making, more closely associated with discursive practices, not being religion’s center.

around three themes: “vegetative” (seasonal food growth), “astrological-cosmic,” and “salvation-historical”; (2) *life-cycle practices*, which are “performed on occasions such as birth, entry into the religious community, the affirmation of the latter by young adults (initiation, complete membership), marriage, dying, and death”; and (3) *variable practices* that “react to unforeseen events,” such as “risky enterprises, diseases, natural catastrophes, love-sickness, murder and sudden death, political crises, and poor harvests.”⁴⁹

Common themes in many religious practices are worship and veneration, the marking of rites of passage, the making of sacrifices and exchanges, fasting and feasting, marking time through commemorations, celebrating festivals, and rituals of political and social legitimation. Pilgrimages and other forms of “crossings” are important in religious practices, too, along with “dwelling” in particular places.⁵⁰ Riesebrodt also notes that certain religious practices are to be performed by “laypersons,” that is, ordinary religious people, whereas others are undertaken by religious “virtuosi,” who as “advanced” religious practitioners radicalize ordinary general practices. “Whereas most laypersons are content to be protected from misfortune,” he observes, “virtuosos seek salvation, whatever the cost. If the price of achieving eternal salvation is putting up with temporal suffering, virtuosos accept it.”⁵¹ Sometimes virtuosos may also be recognized or official religious leaders—clergy, seers, shamans, and the like—but very often they are independent souls, usually mystics and ascetics.

The Mutual Influencing of Practices and Premises

The idea that religious practices are “based upon” premises about superhuman powers should not be mistaken for the idea that premises come first and practices follow, or that beliefs are more fundamental than practices. Considering the prehistory of religion, it is impossible to say which came first, the premise or the practice. Considered analytically, the relationship must be seen as mutually interactive. Religious premises explain and justify particular complexes of practices, and the performance of practices often shapes religious premises. The practices and premises depicted in figure 1.3 are thus positioned in the same vertical space (rather than one preceding another) with each influencing the other (arrows c and d) (and both also

49. Ibid. Pp. 95, 91, 92, 99, 108, 111.

50. Tweed. *Crossing and Dwelling*; Jonathan Z. Smith. 1992. *To Take Place*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

51. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 122.

being influenced by the outcomes of practices [f]). Insisting on this mutual influence of practices and premises prevents this account from being a fundamentally cognitivist theory, one in which religion is viewed as something that grows out of people's heads. Of course, practicing religion requires cognitive activity. But by this account, embodied practices oriented toward superhuman powers define the core of religion.⁵²

This practice-centered approach to religion is not an alien imposition; it is consistent with the view from inside religions. Consider, for example, how religious communities induct young members (children and perhaps converts) into their religions. No one first ensures that children have learned the cognitive content of the religious tradition, and only then allow or ask them to put that content into practice. No, newcomers begin by participating in religious practices, and only later—and sometimes never—are they taught the ideas and meanings that underlie the practices. That does not mean that those religious practices on their own cannot make sense to newcomers, however, because practices are *meaningful* repeated actions and so inherently embody and express their own significance. There are more ways of knowing in religion (and sports and music and many other activities), in other words, than simply grasping ideas.⁵³

Consider, too, the assumptions about human dispositions and transformation embedded in many religious understandings of practices, even when they are not explicitly articulated. It is not that people first think or comprehend something religious and subsequently undertake a practice. Rather, the idea of many practices is to work the other way around: People need to start engaging in the prescribed practices and, it is hoped, as a result they should over time find themselves transformed in spirit and mind. Practices, in other words, are *formative*, not simply expressive. The sheer *doing* of them helps to bring into being that which they also embody. For example, the rabbi at the synagogue does not teach that the members of his congregation should try to feel generous toward the poor and, if they do, then give money. They should just do the right thing by giving, whatever they are feeling, and then ideally they will perhaps come to feel

52. I devote less direct attention in this book to bodies themselves than I could. Much good work on the matter exists, which I hope interested readers bring to mind, and more work could be developed in the future.

53. This emphasis on practice is consistent, too, with all we know about processes of religious conversion, which tend to begin with changes in significant social network ties; continue with changes in practices, identity, affiliation; and lastly (usually) involve revisions of religious beliefs (Stark and Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 114–138).

generous later as a result. American evangelicalism does not say to first get oneself to feel “spiritual” and then pray to God if that happens—no, one just needs to start praying and *that* will help one *get* more spiritual. Much of ancient Latin Christianity taught the rule, *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (“The law of praying is the law of believing” or “As we pray so we believe”), which meant that praying well leads to believing well, that liturgy forms theology, worship shapes faith. Different religions will express this dynamic in diverse ways, yet the underlying principle that religious practices are formative and not merely expressive undergirds many practices of most religions, from saying Islamic prayers five times a day (*Salat*) to Hindu meditation and beyond.

The point here, again, is twofold. First, cognitively centered, confessionally driven, intellectualist religions are rare—and most that appear to be are, upon closer inspection, less so than they seem. Religions, as with most of human social life, center on embodied practices. Second, the premises and practices that help to define religion are mutually influencing. The experience of performing practices can shape religious premises just as much as premises explain and justify practices.

Terminological and Other Clarifications

Having defined religion in this way, we can now distinguish four closely related but importantly different concepts. The first is the plural of religion, “religions.” The word “religion” (singular), as used above, operates as a theoretical concept, referring abstractly to the class of all religions as particular kinds of practices humans perform. The word “religions” (plural), by contrast, refers to specific, concrete instances of those complexes of practices performed in time and space. For example, Shia Islam, Jainism, and Wicca are actual religions; as such, they are also *instances* of the abstract theoretical concept “religion” defined above. When we use the analytical term “religion,” we must not think that it refers to some specific, “least common denominator” super-religion or trans-religious entity, which can be partitioned into “denominations.” No such thing exists. All that exists in actuality are particular religions. As defined above, religion exists only as an analytical, theoretical concept. So, when we wish to employ this theoretical concept, we should speak of “religion,” but when we wish to refer to specific, concrete instances of religion, we should say “religions” or “a religion.”⁵⁴

54. See Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. xii, 1.

The second concept to distinguish from “religion” is “religiousness.”⁵⁵ The latter should be used to describe the religious features or involvement of particular religious practitioners⁵⁶—and perhaps small units of practitioners, such as families, when their practices can rightly be described in the singular. “Religiousness is the subjective appropriation and interpretation of religion. . . . Religiousness is best understood as the result of a dialectic of institutionalized practices and subjective appropriation and interpretation,” Riesebrodt writes.⁵⁷ How often someone (or a couple or family) venerates spirits, lights candles in the temple, fasts from eating at appointed times, or offers animal sacrifices are matters of their *religiousness* as persons (or small groups) practicing religion. And that refers to a different level of analysis than “religion,” as defined above, which is concerned centrally with complexes of culturally prescribed practices, not the engagement of particular people with those practices. So when we wish to speak about “*how* religious” a distinct person (or couple or family) is, to what extent they have appropriated religion, we mean their “religiousness.” By contrast, again, when we say “religion,” we refer back to the complex of prescribed practices itself. This distinction between complexes of prescribed practices, on the one hand, and people’s levels of involvement in those practices, on the other, is crucial to keep clear in our minds to avoid confusion. As I noted earlier, much of what follows in this book, especially after this chapter, concerns human religiousness, not religion as a conceptual category.

The third related but distinct concept is “religious tradition.” This phrase adds to the concept of religion the idea of temporal continuity, that is, the similarity of religious practices as they are repeated over time, usually over generations and maybe millennia. As an abstract theoretical construct, “religion” as defined above can be considered analytically, apart from any concrete instantiation. But actual religions as real complexes of practices situated in time and space always face the question of how much (or whether) they do and should try to remain the same over time. Some religions are highly invested in their own changeless nature; others have few problems developing over time. The idea of a religious tradition points to the temporal continuity of religious practices. It may refer to a religion’s own claims about which practices and beliefs are essential to maintain for the religion to remain “orthodox” (for example, the need to believe in a Trinitarian

55. Many social scientists prefer the term “religiosity,” but that strikes me as a barbaric neologism, so I use the phonetically simpler and more linguistically natural “religiousness.”

56. Here I follow Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. P. 76.

57. Ibid.

doctrine of God to be considered Christian). Tradition may refer to the key symbols, practices, persons, and sites belonging to different religions that help to make them distinct from one another (for instance, the centrality of the Qur'an, Muhammad, Mecca, and Salat, which help identify Islam as distinct from other traditions). Tradition may also refer to the way religious practices have always (at least allegedly) been done, as a way to explain authoritatively and so legitimate the ways they are practiced today (for example, Jewish Passover commemorating the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt). The term tradition may be applied in other useful ways, too. For my purposes, the important conceptual distinction to maintain here is between "religion" as a theoretical category useful for analytical purposes, and "religious tradition" or "traditions" as references to actual practices, beliefs, symbols, and other elements that seem to help define the continuity of religious identity and activity over time.⁵⁸

What I do *not* mean by traditions are static and immutable ways of practicing and believing. We can recognize temporal continuity in religions without fossilizing their cultures in our minds. Human traditions of all kinds are never fixed but fluid, mixing, adapting, and morphing, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly. Clusters of religious practices are always diverse, converging, and diverging. The boundaries of religious traditions are porous, the premises and practices themselves often contain glitches and unanswerable questions, and the human cultures prescribing and persons performing the practices are by nature creative. A realistic concept of religious traditions, therefore, must grasp that their temporal continuities are *relative*, so religious cultures and institutions are always located somewhere in the middle range of a spectrum between the extremes of absolute flux and permanent changelessness.

The fourth distinct concept, which I have already been using, is the adjective "*religious*." That term simply operates, as in ordinary use, to note that a person, place, or thing has to do with religion in some significant way. Thus, we speak of religious founders, religious pilgrimage destinations, and religious relics, for instance, to denote that the people, locations, and objects in question are importantly related to some complex of practices referencing superhuman powers.

Some other clarifications are important. First, the discussion above relies on a common sociological shorthand that can make it sound like traditions, cultures, and institutions are the active agents or actors of history.

58. Ibid. P. 77.

That is a mere convention to keep prose from becoming unmanageable. In fact, traditions, cultures, and institutions are not agents that act. Human persons are. This point the theory of personalism requires.⁵⁹ Living traditions, cultures, and institutions are emergently real social facts existing because of the activities of persons, on which they are continually dependent. As a result, they possess irreducible “downwardly causal” powers, but, again, only emergently because of and through the ongoing activities of human persons. So, when I write as shorthand in this book that “the culture prescribes” and “the tradition intends,” what I always mean is something like the more accurate but verbose phrases, “some combination of the founders, leaders, spokespersons, promoters, interpreters, and other influential agents in the culture/institution/tradition within which they have some position, authority, or legitimacy and so represent and speak for prescribes” or “intends.” Readers presumably are pleased that I have sacrificed such technical precision for the sake of clarity. But it must be remembered that human *persons*, not social units, are always and everywhere the causally capacitated agents of action in this theory, whether as distinct persons or through social processes of institutional action.

Second, definitions of religion notoriously struggle with certain ambiguous cases. Among them is the question of whether Buddhism is a religion. Some versions of Buddhism posit deities, while others posit none. So is Buddhism a religion or “only” a philosophy? The answer is determined by the response to this question: Does the ambiguous case involve *the premise of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, and the performance of complexes of culturally prescribed practices seeking to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with the powers?* If it does, then it counts as a religion. If not, then it does not count. (And if between those definite positions we wish to apply concepts like “quasi-religions,” “para-religions,” “identity transformation organizations,” and so on, nothing in this theory objects, as long as we remember the definitional touchstone of superhuman powers.) The same is true when it comes to Confucianism, Reform Judaism, Unitarian Universalism, the liberal end of mainline Protestantism, new religious movements centered on charismatic human leaders, the self-declared “spiritual but not religious,” Scientology, Alcoholics Anonymous, New Age movements, astrology, holistic health groups, Star Trek fandom, ghost hunters, or any other arguably ambiguous case.⁶⁰ Furthermore,

59. See discussion of personalism in Theoretical Influences section of the introduction.

60. See Michael Jindra. 2003. “Natural/supernatural Conceptions in Western Cultural

massive social conglomerations that include or involve religious traditions *can also be more than* religious traditions. As Riesebrodt observes:

To the extent that Hinduism and Buddhism represent complexes of religious practices, they are religious. At the same time, we must not reduce them to the concept of religion. They may even be far more than religions or, in part, something other than religions. . . . It is not necessary to classify under the rubric of religion every reflection made by a Buddhist regarding human existence . . . simply because someone has described a priori that Buddhism is a religion.⁶¹

In short, the categories religion and something-other-than-religion need not be either/or but may be both/and. Thus, for another example, we can rightly understand Hinduism to be a religion and, in various aspects, a civilization, a worldview, and a philosophical tradition. Also, importantly, weighing whether some complex of practices constitutes a religion is not a value judgment. To be called “only” a philosophy and not a religion is not an insult. Things simply are what they are, and our analytical goal is to understand and categorize them properly. There is no need to jockey to classify something as religious when it is not. Clarity in discerning the difference is our main concern.

When trying to sort out whether some group is a religion, it is absolutely crucial to keep in mind the distinction described above between religion and religiousness. Religion is an abstract analytical category defined by a set of stipulated features. Religiousness concerns the actual, variable subjective meanings and intensities of practices of religious practitioners (certainty of beliefs, frequency of prayer, etc.). Religions are constituted not by practitioners’ subjective intentions at a given time, but by institutional and publicly objective elements, such as traditions, cultures, sacred texts, and established “liturgies.”⁶² Not every practitioner in a group must accept the premises about superhuman powers behind every practice, but to be religious the practices themselves must be culturally institutionalized as oriented toward gaining access to superhuman powers. So for a type of action

Context.” *Anthropological Forum*. 13: 159–166; Arthur Greil, 1993. “Explorations along the Sacred Frontier.” In David Bromley and Jeffrey Hadden (eds.). *Handbook of Cults and Sects in America*. Greenwich, CT: JAI. Pp. 153–172; Christopher Bader, Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker. 2011. *Paranormal America*. New York: NYU Press.

61. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 77, 78.

62. See Bernhard Lang. 1997. *Sacred Games*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

to count as a religion does not require that all or even any of the practitioners at any given time understand and affirm the premises behind their religious practices.

For example, a congregation of highly secular American Episcopalians, most of whom, let us suppose, worship not to get something from God but for social, aesthetic, and family reasons, still counts here as a religious community, since, regardless of their subjective beliefs and intentions, their practices of worship conform to our definition of religion. If, however, that congregation proceeded to eliminate the *Book of Common Prayer*, all liturgical formulas, sacramental practices like baptism and Eucharist, and so on, then eventually they would shift from being religious to a local community group. A similar logic would apply, for example, to a Reform Jewish congregation. Likewise, if a member of the clergy conducts a funeral using established religious rubrics, that counts as religion being practiced, even if everyone in attendance is agnostic, angry, or distracted.

By contrast, a “human potential” group led by a highly charismatic leader teaching esoteric ideas, whose members regularly report experiencing meaningful insights, transports of reverie, and a strong sense of the sacred unity of all things, would probably not count as religion if its leader did not claim to represent, possess, or control superhuman powers that the group sought to access through complexes of practices. Religion, in short, is not defined here by apparent signs of religiousness, however intense. Whether something is a religion is known by public, institutional features stipulated in the definition of religion. *Religiousness* then follows as a matter of practitioners’ variable, subjective beliefs, as well as how often they perform and how meaningful they find religious practices (figure 1.4).⁶³

63. Take the case of Spanish speakers saying goodbye, “Adios,” which literally means, “To God,” commending someone into the hands of God until they meet again. Is that religious? The question is answered by first recognizing that it does not concern religion (as conceptualized social ontology) but religiousness (as empirical practice)—it asks about what people do and why they do it, not what religion is. For questions about religiousness, subjective meanings and intentions matter. So whether bidding “Adios” is a genuine religious practice or a secularized shard of some former religious practice depends on the meanings and motives of the persons involved and the cultural context informing them. It may well belong to the religious practice of a devout Catholic who says it to another “meaningfully,” but not for many others who say it casually. Thus, *religiousness* comes in degrees and can be plotted on continuums. Pentecostalism does not represent “more religion” than liberal Presbyterianism because it tends more obviously to be oriented toward seeking help from superhuman powers. Both are religions in their own right. But Pentecostals may express more *religiousness* than liberal Presbyterians, according to this distinction.



FIGURE 1.4. Vietnamese American Loan Pham Thai proudly displays her Buddhist shrine in her California home, where she makes offerings, lights candles, and says prayers. For many people from most religious traditions, the regular performance of religious practices is more important than correctly professing the “right” religious doctrines. Photographer, Christina Tran. (Copyright: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at University of California–Irvine and UC Irvine Libraries Southeast Asian Archive.)

A Basic Illustration: Sunni Islam

The discussion thus far has been abstract. To help make the theory more concrete, I offer an example of how one widely accepted representation of one particular religious tradition, Sunni Islam, illustrates the ideas I have presented.⁶⁴ In Sunni Islam, the *superhuman power* of absolutely crucial importance is the One, Eternal, and Absolute, all-powerful, all-merciful, all-knowing God, Allah. Angels and Jinn (genies) may also play a role in Islam as other, less crucial superhuman agents. The *complex of practices* prescribed centers around the Five Pillars of Islam. These include, first, *Shahada* (faith), the declaration of faith and trust that there is only one God—Allah—and that Mohammad is his messenger; second, *Salat* (prayer), prayers offered five times a day, according to appointed times—at dawn, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, and at night; and third, *Zakāt* (charity), the practice of alms-giving in amounts based upon accumulated wealth. The fourth pillar is *Sawm* (fasting), abstaining from eating, which comes in three types: ritual fasting during the month of Ramadan, fasting as compensation for repentance, and ascetic fasting. Fifth is the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca that every able-bodied Muslim is obliged to make at least once in his or her lifetime, which occurs during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hijjah. In addition, good Muslims are expected to follow *Sharia*, Islamic law, of which the Sunni tradition represented here comprises four main schools: the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, *Hanbali*. They are also supposed to observe certain hygienic, dietary, greeting, and burial practices. Sunni Muslims must not consume alcohol, pork, or blood, and male Muslims must be circumcised. Other practices related to family life, sex, and economic behaviors—such as obedience to parents and the prohibition of usury and polyandry—are expected to be observed in Sunni Islam as well (figure 1.5). More generally, Sunni Muslims are expected to avoid all sins defined by the tradition and instead to practice goodness.

Knowledge of this superhuman power and prescribed practices are *based on premises about the existence and nature of Allah* and his will for humanity, which are known through revelations of God to prophets of the past, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but most definitively to Mohammad, through the archangel Gabriel, revelations that took

64. “Sunni Islam” encompasses massively different self-understandings and expressions, so I present this as “one widely accepted representation.”



FIGURE 1.5. An Iraqi Sunni Muslim family gathers at home for *Iftar*, the breaking of the daily fast, to share an evening meal during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, during which time adult Muslims abstain from eating food, drinking liquids, smoking, and having sexual relations from dawn to sunset. (Copyright: AP photo/Hadi Mizban)

written form in the Qur'an. Some of the *hoped-for goods and deliverances* promised by the practice of Sunni Islam include, perhaps most importantly, to be raised from the dead in body on the "Day of Resurrection" and judged by Allah according to one's deeds and rewarded with the joy, bliss, and physical pleasures of *Jannah*, that is, paradise, and to be delivered from the punishments and pains of *Jahannam*, hell. Meanwhile, in this life, devoted Muslims, in faith and obedience to Allah and belief in his messenger, Mohammad, are promised the blessings and protection of God, the merciful forgiveness of sins, justice for good works and repentance, and the assurance of knowledge that all things that transpire are decreed by Allah. Further, faithful Muslims hope to enjoy as a result of their religious practices happiness, inner peace, satisfaction of knowing one is obeying the true God, and the goods of an orderly and just civilization. Obedience as a Muslim also produces in the faithful the many this-worldly goods resulting from self-discipline, self-control, and self-restraint, including improved health, personal character, and tranquility. These in turn promise to curb individuals' destructive impulses and temptations, and form in them life-enhancing virtues, such as hospitality, generosity, and humility.

The collective result of the faithful practice of the whole Islamic community will be the suppression of exploitation, disease, and other social problems—all of which will culminate in the enjoyment of the fellowship of a transnational brotherhood of Muslims. At bottom and in the end, however, simply to know and obey the true God, Allah, is its own best and highest reward. As the Qur'an (13:28) teaches, "Truly, in remembering God do hearts find rest."

Another Illustration: American Protestant Evangelicalism

Consider as a second example American Protestant evangelicalism, about which my greater familiarity allows me to elaborate more. From the "emic" perspective of many of its practitioners, evangelicalism seems to be one of the least practice-oriented religious traditions in existence. True, American evangelicalism stands out among religions for its emphasis not on behavioral rituals and practices but on certain correct cognitive beliefs, words, and spiritual attitudes, and on having the right, informal, not culturally prescribed, relationship with God. Performing religious practices—repeatedly carrying out actions fraught with religious significance, especially any that are "ritualistic"—may on the inside seem very un-evangelical. Indeed, some evangelicals do not consider themselves "religious" at all; they see themselves as simply believers in the gospel truth, as opposed to followers of (other) religions who, though it probably should not be said in polite company, worship false gods. Evangelicalism thus provides a more challenging case with which to "test drive" my definition of religion.

The *premised superhuman power* of modern American evangelicalism is the Trinitarian God of Christianity, as presented in the Bible and defined in the first four ecumenical councils of the Christian church (even if many evangelicals are not aware of them), and focused through the theological lens of the Protestant Reformation, Christian pietism, and frontier and urban revivalism. For some evangelicals, Jesus Christ is in practice the primary agent of divine power, while for others it is the Holy Spirit. All, however, are (or at least are supposed to be) formally not only theistic in believing in a personal God, but properly Trinitarian, believing in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

65. In the everyday practice of evangelical folk religion—especially as it is worked out in lay soteriology, in which the loving Son intervenes and "takes the bullet" of the punitive Father—

Among the *culturally prescribed religious practices* in the American evangelical tradition, the absolute necessities are believing in the Christian gospel, repenting from sin, accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior, trusting in God's unmerited grace, and learning to follow God's commands. Required but perhaps not absolutely necessary practices in evangelicalism include regularly attending and worshipping at church, affirming the infallibility if not inerrancy of the Bible and reading scripture faithfully, praying regularly, giving money to one's church and other Christian organizations, and generally growing in personal "sanctification" (sinning less). Good evangelicals are also supposed to "share their faith" in personal evangelism by "witnessing" to non-believers.⁶⁶ Very important, too, is living an adequately righteous life that follows the Ten Commandments and other moral teachings of the Bible.

The list of optional or advanced practices that either foster more essential ones or add to them is lengthy. Typically it would include praying as a family before meals, having regular private "devotions," attending a weekly Bible study, "getting more involved" at church (by volunteering on committees or serving in the nursery, for instance), and reading Christian books to advance one's spiritual growth or theological knowledge. Resting on Sundays, going on short-term mission and service trips, supporting "para-church ministries," listening to edifying Christian music or radio preachers, learning about and supporting "world missions," and attending occasional Christian learning seminars are also applauded. Living a traditional family-centered life (valuing marriage and children, avoiding divorce, opposing abortion, and so on), tithing one-tenth of one's income, memorizing Bible passages, serving as an elder or deacon at church, attending an evangelical college, reading evangelical magazines, participating in a "prayer chain" team, voting in political elections to promote Christian values, purposefully working to strengthen one's marriage and family by "making God the center" of them, and other practices could be added to this list. Anthropologist Tanya Luhmann has also identified six "emotional practices" that some kinds of evangelicals perform to evoke "the feeling of being loved by God."⁶⁷ They are "crying in the presence of

some if not many evangelicals live as practical tritheists, not Trinitarians, but that is another matter.

66. Although personal evangelism happens much less than the normative idea would commend.

67. On the important topic of emotions and religion generally, see Ole Riis and Linda Wood-

God,” “seeing from God’s perspective,” “practicing love, peace, and joy,” relating to “God the therapist,” “reworking God the father,” and enjoying “emotional cascades.”⁶⁸ Evangelical “virtuosos”⁶⁹ may go even further and lead worship in church praise bands, consistently and confidently “share the gospel” with their non-Christian friends, learn some formal theology, go on extended missions or service trips overseas, and make spiritual retreats.

In addition to these positive or constructive religious practices, American evangelicalism also prescribes “negative practices,” those that involve avoiding or abstaining from actions. Some of these are more “spiritual,” like never trusting in one’s own “good works” to earn one’s salvation and not questioning the divine truthfulness of the Bible. They also include religious behaviors, such as not dropping out of Christian fellowship or ceasing to worship God. Evangelical negative practices also entail moral and relational (especially sexual) issues, like avoiding marrying a non-evangelical, not having sex outside of marriage, not talking dirty with swear words, and not viewing pornography. Avoiding these is necessary because they are believed in evangelicalism to compromise one’s spiritual well-being and prospects of receiving the goods of evangelical life practice.

What are the *goods and deliverances* that evangelical practices promise? According to the American Protestant evangelical tradition, the most important blessings that result from these practices are personally to experience the grace, mercy, and love of God, to receive the complete forgiveness of one’s sins by the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross, to live in daily fellowship with God, and to know the blessed assurance that one day one will live with God in heaven for eternity. Those promises concern both this world and life after death, and involve both positive and negative outcomes. Blessings from God include love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, fellowship, guidance, and eternal life in heaven. Troubles and catastrophes averted include living in guilt and spiritual darkness, being alienated from one’s divine maker and redeemer, and enduring the torments of hell. These are the most important consequences of engaging

head. 2010. *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Douglas Davies. 2011. *Emotion, Identity, Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Christian Smith. 2007. “Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account.” *Sociology of Religion*. 68: 165–178.

68. Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back*. Pp. 111–131.

69. Riesebrodt (*Promise of Salvation*) focuses on “virtuosos.” Pp. 84–149.

(or not) in evangelical religious practices, according to that tradition's dominant cultural system.

Evangelical faith and practice are not only or even primarily about justification by faith, spiritual growth, and the promise of heaven, however. Often they concentrate on much more worldly and therapeutic concerns. The best place to learn about them is to listen to people's prayer requests in evangelical religious services and small groups. Then tune in to the blessings and goods that are named in contemporary worship songs, sermons given in pulpits and radio programs, and even many older traditional hymns. Pay close attention, too, to evangelicals talking in Bible studies about what certain scripture passages "mean to them" when it comes to their "practical application." Then peruse the shelves of evangelical bookstores and book publishers' catalogues. Doing so, what does one discover? Certainly, a great deal about Jesus, salvation, God's love, and eternal life—but much more as well.

Performing evangelical practices is also expected to yield an abundance of immanent blessings, including inner peace, security, comfort, stability, encouragement, courage, perseverance, and joy. Practicing evangelicalism is believed to grant access to divine guidance and powers to heal sickness, provide employment, resolve marital conflicts, overcome addictions, aid the skill of doctors, raise one's children well, make good decisions, ease the difficulties of major life transitions, exercise patience in trying situations, help courtroom judges make just decisions, reconcile neighbors, bring order to family chaos, turn wayward children home, ease the suffering of aging parents, and much more. Evangelicalism bathes its devoted practitioners in uplifting songs of praise and worship, envelops them in communities of personal care and support, and surrounds them with words of hope, affirmation, sustenance, encouragement, and the promise of subjective well-being. The charismatic movement and the therapeutic turn in American evangelicalism have amplified these tendencies since the 1960s and '70s,⁷⁰ yet they have been part of the evangelical tradition for centuries.

In short, like every other religion, American evangelicalism prescribes complexes of religious practices that are premised on the existence and na-

70. James D. Hunter. 1983. *American Evangelicalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Todd Brenneman. 2013. *Homespun Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press; Kimon Howland Sargeant. 2000. *Seeker Churches*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Thomas Bergler. 2012. *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

ture of a superhuman power and that are oriented toward realizing human goods and averting bads, often including, for example, receiving blessings, avoiding misfortunes, and being delivered from or coping with crises and catastrophes.⁷¹

Is This Reductionism?

Is the account of religion advocated here reductionist? Reductionism could signify three different things, it seems to me. It might mean disallowing

71. Here is the question of whether “believing” can be considered a religious practice. The answer is: It depends on the particular tradition. In the case of American evangelicalism, believing is definitely one of its religious practices, as defined here. American evangelicalism appears to prioritize believing over doing, trusting over rituals, and the right subjective stance over bodily practices. Relative to most other religions, evangelicalism is quite cognitive, abstract, and subjective—even if that often plays out in highly relational terms and is activist in certain ways. Evangelicalism’s account of itself insists that good practices always *follow* right beliefs, that anything good people do is a *response* to a prior inner transformation accomplished by correctly believing, accepting, and trusting. Anything else evangelicalism would consider “salvation by works,” the heresy over which Martin Luther broke with Rome to launch the Protestant Reformation, from which American evangelicalism descends. Allowing human practices to take a place logically and chronologically prior to correct beliefs is theologically anathema in evangelicalism. In strictly formal, theological, and spiritual terms, evangelicalism’s (emic) account of itself may be somewhat valid. But I think (theologically informed) sociological insight also challenges its formulation, and not simply by offering a relativistic, alternative perspective, but by more accurately describing the actual operation of religious beliefs vis-à-vis practices in evangelical life on the ground. I do not intend here to categorize every human belief as a practice. Some beliefs are just that, mere beliefs, and not practices. But in some cases, including, I think, American evangelicalism, repeatedly emphasizing the centrality of the need to believe in certain ways itself becomes part of the tradition’s religious practice, in two senses. As a first-order fact, the very activities of believing in Jesus, trusting God, accepting forgiveness, believing the Bible, and so on, as they are continually performed by evangelicals, are themselves enacted as what is rightly described as a core practice in that religious tradition. They are also signified or instantiated by empirically observable actions, such as saying “the salvation prayer,” raising a hand, walking down the aisle, making a “profession of faith,” or giving public testimony. Then, as a second-order fact, evangelicalism’s discourse about rightly believing, trusting, confessing, and professing becomes a higher-order core practice in that tradition. That is, the act of responding to the essential need to correctly believe as an evangelical is one evangelical practice, and the need then to continually talk about the need to correctly believe is a second evangelical practice. Stated differently, American evangelicalism has taken what begins as the volitionally oriented cognitive act of “having faith” and transformed it into a genuine religious practice that is sociologically central to its tradition. Recall that practices are culturally meaningful behaviors that are intentionally repeated over time. That is what believing in Jesus, having faith, trusting in God, accepting forgiveness, believing the Bible, trusting God’s promises, and so forth are in American evangelicalism. They are obviously cognitive and affective behaviors: acts of assent, affirmation, commitment, and confession. They are accompanied by other behaviors, such as reciting prayers, responding to “invitations,” and making public professions. They are clearly culturally

religious claims that superhuman powers really exist (*metaphysical* reductionism, an error of unwarranted denial). It might mean ignoring key features of religion that are essential for defining its ontology⁷² (*conceptual* reductionism, an error of analytical omission). Or it could mean unacceptably violating the real complexities of religion by describing it in simplistic or one-dimensional terms—an error that usually sounds like “X is really *nothing but* Y,” when in fact X through emergence is a lot more than Y⁷³ (*explanatory* reductionism, an error of superficial theoretical description). So, in any of these ways is my account of religion reductionist?

My theory is not *metaphysically* reductionist because it does not deny the possibility that the truth claims of any religious tradition are correct. This book’s theory of religion concerns the ontology of objects in the human social world, not ultimate reality. It neither says nor implies that religious premises about superhuman powers are true or false. Making such a claim

meaningful. And they are indeed very intentionally repeated over time. Once we grasp this, it becomes hard to imagine *not* seeing the imperative of right believing in evangelicalism as a religious practice (many non-evangelical readers of my early manuscript said this was so obvious that I did not even need to explain it). The same is true of evangelicalism’s thick and widespread discourse about the imperative to rightly believe. Not only is correct believing in evangelicalism a practice; so too is talking about correct believing. Furthermore, these two orders of evangelical religious practice organized around believing are mutually reinforcing. The ongoing work of believing by evangelicals is promoted by the continual discourse about the need to rightly believe, and vice-versa. Crucial to my case here is the fact that, in evangelical culture, it is never sufficient to believe in Jesus once and then to stop believing, to shift into neutral. One cannot simply trust God and then set that aside to focus on other things. Belief, trust, and acceptance must be ongoing, ever-renewed experiences. One must persistently believe, always trust, never stop having faith. Believing in Jesus, having faith in God, accepting forgiveness, believing the Bible, and the rest are life-long imperatives—even if the burden of those imperatives is said to be light and joyful. That belief must be ongoing and continually reaffirmed in evangelicalism, which transforms it from a mere one-time volitional-affective-cognitive act of “conversion” or “personalization” into a genuine practice. American evangelicalism’s religious practices—including believing, trusting, and accepting Jesus—are therefore not exempt from the general category of practices in this book’s definition of religion. In Riesebrodt’s terms, believing, in American evangelicalism, is a “discursive practice,” but also, I suggest, an “interventionist practice,” in that both believing and talking about believing are crucial to having a right relationship with God in that religious tradition.

72. See footnote 8 in the introduction.

73. Applied to a theory of human minds, for instance, explanatory reductionism might assert that human consciousness is merely the physical activity of brain neurons, nothing more. Extending that logic to explain (away) the “you” of human personhood, for example, Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA structure, declared in his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* that, “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons” (1994. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons. Pp. 3, 11). What is really astonishing is not Crick’s hypothesis but his philosophical naiveté.

would be unwarranted, as it is beyond the capacity of the social sciences to know either way.⁷⁴

I do not believe that this book's theory of religion is *conceptually* reductionist either. To understand why, we must distinguish between (1) key features of religion that are *essential* for *defining* its ontology, on the one hand, and (2) *important* aspects of religion that help us generally to *understand* and *explain* it well, on the other. Defining is not the same as understanding and explaining. I believe that my definition of religion includes the key features essential for naming religion's social ontology.⁷⁵ That does not mean, however, that my definition includes all important aspects of religion needed to understand and explain it well. *Of course it does not.* No definition of anything does. Definitions do not include every feature, property, and capacity of an object one might wish to know in order to comprehend it. Definitions tell us what things *are*. They do not tell us everything about what things *are like*, how they *work*, or what they are *good for*. That my definition does not aim to describe everything of importance about religion does not make it reductionist.⁷⁶ It only means we need more than a mere definition to understand and explain religion adequately.

The question of *explanatory* reductionism is more complicated. Does my theory unacceptably violate the real complexities of religion by describing it in simplistic or one-dimensional terms? I do not believe so. First, let us remind ourselves of the truism that any theory is descriptively simpler than what it theorizes. The whole point of theory is to help make an overwhelmingly complex reality comprehensible. Theory inherently reduces an object to the conceptual and explanatory necessities in order to clarify, enlighten, and explain. The relevant problem is not simplification per se—which is not only unavoidable but necessary and good—but unacceptable violations of complexities through the disregard of conceptual and explanatory necessities, which produces simplistic or one-dimensional descriptions. That is explanatory reductionism.

74. See footnotes 32 and 33 in the introduction.

75. If that is wrong, we will only know it if someone demonstrates its analytical omissions with good evidence and arguments. No definition is immune from potential improvement. Meanwhile, I take this book's definition to be fully adequate.

76. Part of the perceived problem here could be the "clinical" feel of social science definitions. For many people, religion is a uniquely personal, spiritual, or ineffable matter, so simply defining it social scientifically may feel reductionist. But that itself does not make such a definition reductionist.

I imagine my theory could be accused of explanatory reductionism for three possible reasons. First, that my account neglects the subjective experience in religion that is vital to many people's engagement in it. Second, that my account is really just warmed-over rational choice theory. Third, that my account is too instrumental or transactional. I take each of these claims and explain why I think they are incorrect.

The first is that my account neglects the subjective experience in religion that is vital for many people. My theory indeed does not make subjective experience the defining feature of religion. But neither does it neglect it. Subjective experience is in my account crucially important for understanding religion. Analytically, however, it concerns the issue of *religiousness*, not *religion*, as differentiated earlier. In fact, most of the rest of this book explores various aspects of religious experience—subjective, cognitive, emotional, and otherwise. Subjective experience plays an important role in my account. It simply is not the key to defining religion's ontology. Whether or not that position is valid is an open theoretical question. But it does not count as explanatory reductionism.

The second anticipated objection is that my account is a version of rational choice theory, which it takes to be explanatorily reductionist.⁷⁷ That claim is not incomprehensible, since a broad “family resemblance” between the two is admittedly discernable. But my theory descends from an entirely different intellectual lineage than rational choice. The latter derives from the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and market-exchange theorists like Adam Smith and Gary Becker, and so has a strong individualistic bent. My account descends from the “*eudaemonian* teleology” of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, mediated through a twentieth-century personalism that has always explicitly opposed utilitarianism and individualism. Some may *read into* my account rational choice's emphasis on the rational acquisition of benefits, the calculated exchange of goods, and the avoidance of costs and maximization of rewards. But my theory proposes nothing about rational deliberation, calculation, exchange, acquisitiveness, strategy, markets, or religious compensators. Although I do believe and have written elsewhere that all humans are oriented toward the realization of certain natural goods,⁷⁸ which here I say are crucial for motivating religion, “natural goods” as conceived

77. Which would especially surprise readers who know that I have spent my career criticizing utilitarian-based rational choice theory, “materialist” accounts of human motivation, and exchange-based views of social relationships, and stressing instead the importance of identity, morality, solidarity, and normative culture.

78. Smith. *What Is a Person?; To Flourish or Destruct*.

in personalism are radically unlike the chosen “benefits” and “rewards” of utilitarianism.⁷⁹ Furthermore, rational choice explains religious practices as individuals’ choices among alternatives that solve their problem of preference maximizing or satisficing. My theory, by comparison, insists that, while religion may do that, it more importantly helps solve people’s bigger “axiological meta-problem” of knowing even what they *ought to* want and “*how to rank* the relative values” of the incommensurate goods that humans face and trade off in life.⁸⁰ In the end, it is fair to say that both my account and rational choice theory belong to the theoretical genus of “purposive action theory.” But within that common genus—to which I am more than pleased to belong—my theory and rational choice belong to two very different species. It cannot rightly be said, then, that my account is just warmed-over rational choice theory and so guilty of its explanatory reductionism.

The third anticipated claim about my theory’s purported explanatory reductionism—that my account is too instrumental or transactional—is the most interesting and arguably plausible. This claim alleges that my theory wrongly characterizes religion as merely or primarily an instrument, a tool, that people use in order to get things they want (too instrumental); and that the relationships and interactions religious people have with superhuman powers are only or essentially deals arranged in order to trade mutually beneficial goods (too transactional). If my theory characterizes religion in these ways, then it is indeed guilty of explanatory reductionism. Does it?

As a preliminary observation, let us note that, while not all religions are instrumentalist or transactional, some are. Some unapologetically prescribe

79. A phenomenological approach (for those who put stock in it) also distinguishes my theory from rational choice. The human existential concerns with human goods and bads, with the blessings, misfortunes, and crises that my theory references, cannot be reduced to instrumental costs and benefits. Many religious concerns about human goods and bads are matters of profound hope and anxiety, emotional elation and upheaval, identity affirmation and crisis, and relational solidarity and alienation—which cannot be re-described in utilitarian terms without doing them violence. In many people’s religious experiences, possible calculations of benefits are overwhelmed by the yearnings, tears, godsendings, terrors, pleadings, and resolutions that accompany them. All of that can be forced through the meat grinder of academic utilitarian-based theories and squeezed into the casings of rational choice terminology, if that is what one is determined to do. But it violates not only the integrity of the critical realist personalism undergirding my account but also the nature of people’s professed experiences of the human goods and bads that my theory references.

80. Schilbrack. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. P. 124—“religions typically function to legitimate comprehensive, all-inclusive paths, highest values, or ultimate norms” (P. 125). Recognized here is the fact that religion is often not merely a choice, but also a prescribing, governing, and controlling tradition, institution, and authority that governs choices.

practicing religion “in order to,” “so that,” and “to get.” Some religious readers ought not to universalize their perhaps less instrumental and transactional religious experiences to all times and places. They also ought not to underestimate the semi-instrumental or quasi-transactional elements of their seemingly less instrumental and transactional religions. Beware the ostensible nobility of seemingly selfless religious faith. Many religious people today are loath to say that they essentially use their religion as a tool to get things from superhuman powers. But that is the least flattering way to put it. Better versions can be expressed. And a close inspection of many people’s actual religious practices reveals a lot more interest in receiving goods through religion than many may be comfortable admitting.⁸¹ That is not cynicism, just empirical observation.

Nonetheless, seeing why this book’s account of religion is not reductionist on instrumental or transactional grounds requires understanding things like blessings sought, crises managed, and misfortunes averted in inclusive, agreeable, and legitimate terms. We have no need to code the goods that religion offers in narrow, negative, or stigmatized ways—as if most religious people are simply manipulating, jockeying for advantage, and brokering bargains with stingy superhuman powers for their own selfish ends. That my theory does not suggest.⁸² In fact, many of the goods for which religious practitioners hope are, when understood inclusively, perfectly legitimate. Is there anything wrong with someone praying for healing from sickness, if they believe superhuman powers can and do heal? Why should not a person want to go to heaven instead of hell, if they believe in them? Ought people wishing to receive blessings in life and the ability to cope with crises really be judged to be bad? I think not. I would be happy to receive blessings and to be able to cope with crises, and I am sure most readers would be, too. So what is the problem?

81. One possible explanation of modern people’s aversion to seeing themselves as practicing religion in order to obtain goods is that idea’s association with “primitive” religions, magic, and anthropomorphized gods, which moderns want to believe they have risen above (perhaps echoing an outdated evolutionary model of religious progress leading to contemporary religion as “Man’s highest spiritual achievement”?). I do not claim that all religions are similar with regard to the character of their superhuman powers or the goods their practitioners hope for. But recall that one of modernity’s favorite conceits is how very different moderns are from traditional, pre-modern peoples. Let us not flatter ourselves too much. Historical continuities in the basic nature of religions are stronger, I suggest, than discontinuities.

82. My account, for instance, does not say that religious practitioners are strategists, planners, managers, or salespeople; or that superhuman powers are resistant, passive, or manipulable targets of their interests.

I suspect the problem is my theory's perceived threat to the following kinds of self-understandings: "I practice religious faith just because I want a personal relationship with God, not to get anything out of him." "I am religious because I believe my faith is true and I wish to know how God wants me to live." And "I am not a religious person because of what it does for me but because of powerful subjective encounters with divine love that I experience." (In fact, these are verbatim quotes from some readers of an early version of this book's pre-publication manuscript.) I do not deny the truth of such statements. I simply note that they entail the very kinds of goods my theory discusses. To have "a personal relationship with God" is itself a blessing that some religions offer their practitioners. But to enjoy such a relationship, one must engage in certain practices, such as praying, worshipping, and reading scripture. No religious tradition says otherwise. Likewise, knowing what "is true" in life and "how God wants me to live" are also benefits this person's religion offers, as well as a means of avoiding misfortunes (that would result from believing untruths and not knowing God's will). Enjoying these too requires performing some religious practices. Similarly, the experience of "powerful subjective encounters with divine love" is also clearly a blessing enjoyed as a result of practicing a religion.⁸³

For whatever reason, some people seem to fear acknowledging that they receive something as a result of engaging in religious practices. But why? Again I ask: What is so bad about that? Human persons, as I explain further in chapter 4, are well equipped to practice religion and have many good reasons to do so. And what would be the alternative, anyway? A theory that says people practice religion for no reason at all? Or do so for reasons that bring them no human goods? Or a theory that says that religious goods are automatically enjoyed or guaranteed without their recipients ever having to perform any practices? Those make no sense. Real religions are not like that. Human beings are not like that. The theory proposed in this book accurately describes the reality of human religions. Whether or not it feels too instrumentalist or transactional—and I do not think it should—it is not guilty of explanatory reductionism on this account.⁸⁴

83. Note that this does not stretch the ordinary meaning of "blessings" to a breaking point (as rational choice recurrently does to rescue itself from internal inconsistency); those goods very reasonably count as blessings.

84. Theories that are fundamentally instrumental or transactional tend to involve a highly "voluntaristic" account of human action, giving people more credit for strategizing and directing their actions and their consequences than they deserve. But my theory is clear that religions and

This objection of reductionism seems to be animated by a desire to experience, understand, or protect religion as fundamentally revolving around a *relationship*, not a giving-and-getting arrangement with superhuman powers. But that objection assumes a false dichotomy, namely, that authentic relationships and arrangements of giving and getting are mutually exclusive. All human relationships, including the most authentic—marital, parental, filial, fraternal, sororal—involve giving and receiving. They are not only about that, but they involve it. (Mind experiment: Try to imagine an authentic, valuable personal relationship that involves no giving or receiving.) That is true even of the religious traditions whose superhuman powers bestow gifts gratuitously, without practitioners needing to earn them. “And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood?”⁸⁵ Giving and receiving need not mean selfish gain; they can readily involve love, grace, mercy, mystery, kindness, reciprocity, and unconditionality. That wide range of possibilities is what I intend my theory to include, in which case, the objection of explanatory reductionism fails.

Critical Empirical Scholarship

This theory of religion is deployable for empirical research programs not only about established religious traditions understood from the perspective of their own institutional centers, but also for critical scholarship focused on power, subordination, exclusion, and dissent within and around religious traditions. (Such concerns are part of what the “critical” in critical realism means.) While my theory of religion centers on the interaction of human and superhuman powers, its broader emphases on power, institutions, traditions, and communities spawn questions for understanding the power-laden interactions *between humans* played out in religious contexts. In particular, since performing “culturally prescribed complexes of practices” to access superhuman powers is the crux of religious activity, a set of important empirical questions emerges about authority and control in the prescription of those practices.

believed-in superhuman powers often, in fact usually, influence, possess, govern, and sometimes overwhelm religious practitioners (see chapter 2). By my account, people are not only the controlling subjects but also the receiving and dependent objects of religion’s emergent social powers. That also contradicts allegations of instrumental and transactional reductionism.

85. Charles Wesley. 1738. *And Can It Be that I Should Gain?* Skeptical readers might also ponder the biblical idea of a “covenant.”



FIGURE 1.6. US Roman Catholic bishops vote on a “zero tolerance” policy on clergy sexual abuse at their 2002 meeting in Dallas, Texas. The social scientific study of religion can focus on issues of institutional and communal authority, power, influence, inclusion, exclusion, voice, silencing, empowerment, and marginalization. (Copyright: Rick Wilking/AFP/Getty Images)

Who are the gatekeepers of the practices of religious traditions and communities? How is authority in religious communities structured, and whom does that structure privilege and deprive? Who has the authority to prescribe which practices may be performed by whom, in what ways, and under what conditions? Whom do various religious groups empower and disenfranchise (purposefully or de facto), how is that achieved, and what are its consequences (figure 1.6)? How and why do different types of religious communities negotiate, manage, or suppress differences in practices and beliefs, both among their religious specialists and ordinary practitioners? What kinds of formal and informal sanctions do religious actors use to maintain the continuity of acceptable practices and beliefs in particular communities over time, and with what consequences for different (potential and actual) members of those communities?

In more concrete terms, how do religious institutions, cultures, and practices interact and help reproduce social inequalities based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual identities, age, and other markers of human difference?⁸⁶ Why do various religious groups in diverse times

86. For example, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith. 2000. *Divided by Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press.

and places emphasize and de-emphasize different unacceptable behaviors—for example, economic (“greed”) versus sexual (“promiscuity”)—when their larger tradition condemns them all? Who recurrently is silenced or shut out of membership of religious communities, under what conditions, why, and with what results? What are the practical consequences in different religious contexts of being poor, female, a foreigner, a racial or ethnic minority, gay or lesbian, elderly, mentally disabled, or physically malformed? This theory of religion should animate these and many related empirical research questions.

Conclusion

To understand and explain religion requires first knowing what religion *is*. Partly, we want to know how to identify a religion when we see it, so as not to confuse religious and non-religious entities and muddle our later analyses. Categorizing entities well requires a clear, accurate, and discriminating definition that carefully matches its concepts to features of the real world. Beyond that and equally importantly, we need to grasp the essential character of religion, its particular social ontology. Only by theorizing religion’s core distinguishing features well—by carefully formulating concepts that both include religion’s essential elements and exclude “accidental” and superfluous characteristics—can we adequately comprehend its nature, causal capacities, and importance in human social life. I hope that is what the definition above accomplishes.

As a final reminder, let us underscore some key distinctions in this theory’s terms that are easy to confuse: the differences between what religion *is* (ontology), what religion *can do* (causal capacities, addressed in the following chapter), and *why* people practice their religions (personal motivations); and the distinction between *religion* (a conceptual, analytical category) and *religiousness* (an empirical variable). We must keep these distinct. Yet my definition of what religion *is* includes ideas about what religion *can do* (help people realize goods and avoid bads) and what *motivates* religious practices (seeking to gain access to and communicate or align oneself with superhuman powers). This is all theoretically coherent only when we remember that the meanings and purposes behind the prescribed religious practices in this analytical definition should be understood as institutional, not personal; that what matters for defining “religion” here are the public, institutionalized meanings and purposes of the cultures and traditions that prescribe religious practices, not the subjective, private, and variable interests of the people performing them.

Appendix to Chapter 1: Situating This Account Theoretically

Finally, it may help some readers, especially scholarly readers, to understand the definition of religion advanced in this chapter if I compare and contrast it with other theoretical accounts. What follows is not an exhaustive comparison with all other definitions and theories of religion, but merely a comparison with enough relevant theories to situate my approach more clearly. Readers less interested in details of theoretical comparison can skip this appendix.

The late sociologist Daniel Bell, one of my mentors in graduate school, described religion as “a set of coherent answers to the core existential questions that confront every human group,” such as “how one meets death, the meaning of tragedy, the nature of obligation, the character of love . . . recurrent questions which are . . . cultural universals.” Religion, then, is “the codification of these answers into creedal form that has significance for its adherents, the celebration of rites which provide an emotional bond for those who participate, and the establishment of an institutional body to bring into congregation those who share the creed and celebration, and provide for the continuation of these rites from generation to generation.”⁸⁷ One can recognize in Bell’s definition elements of the approach of this chapter, including his emphasis on humans’ existential problems and the celebration of practices and rituals by believers. However, differences are apparent, too. From my perspective, Bell’s defining religion as “codified answers to questions” is too cognitive, cerebral, intellectualist. Religion is not at heart a set of replies to existential questions, even if it often involves this. Instead it often places more emphasis on mundane, this-worldly concerns. Bell’s account clearly excludes religions that have strong elements of magic involved. His definition also lacks any reference to the superhuman (or supernatural, sacred, or other substantive term). Any number of secular philosophies or worldviews could count as religions by his account, which is a problem. Furthermore, Bell’s emphasis on “codified creedal forms” seems to privilege certain kinds of text-based religions, neglecting less systematic religions often practiced in non-literate cultures. And the stress his definition places on emotionally bonded congregations and intergenerational continuity conflates the concept of religion with the distinct notion of a religious tradition, which I differentiated above. From my perspective, Bell hits the target

87. Bell. 1980. “The Return of the Sacred?” In Bell. *The Winding Passage*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 333–334.

but misses the bull's-eye. His definition lets in too much that is not essential and excludes some key points that are essential.

More recently, the political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have advanced an account of religion that seems closer to the one I am advocating. Their book, *Sacred and Secular*, actually never defines religion, as it focuses primarily on the question of secularization in modernity. Nevertheless, their theory does imply a particular view of religion that we can rationally reconstruct from their discussion. They write:

Virtually all of the world's major religious cultures provide reassurance that, even though the individual alone can't understand or predict what lies ahead, a higher power will ensure that things work out. . . . Religious . . . ideologies assure people that the universe follows a plan, which guarantees that if you follow the rules, everything will turn out well, in this world or the next. This belief reduces stress, enabling people to shut out anxiety and focus on coping with their immediate problems.⁸⁸

They then run this commentary:

Without such a belief system, extreme stress tends to produce withdrawal reactions. Under conditions of insecurity, people have a powerful need to see authority as both strong and benevolent—even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Individuals experiencing stress have a need for rigid, predictable rules. They need to be sure what is going to happen because they are in danger—their margin of error is slender and they need maximum predictability.⁸⁹

Again, this approach includes numerous elements that parallel those of this book, including the emphases on human reliance on “higher powers” for help in trouble, the need for people to perform practices that are something like “follow[ing] a plan,” and the promise of security and coping with problems. But, like Bell, Norris and Inglehart are too specific in some places and not precise enough in others. In reality, religion is about more than mere psychological “reassurance,” stress reduction, and anxiety management. This definition of religion is too psychological. It also neglects religion's positive side of promising blessings. Few religions see the universe as “following a plan,” not to mention one that “guarantees” that “if you follow the rules, everything will turn out well, in this world or the next.” The idea

88. Norris and Inglehart. 2004. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 19.

89. Ibid.

of a “plan” is too schematic and mechanical. Most religions offer promises and hopes, not guarantees. The idea of things “turning out well” is too optimistic and vague. Also, some religions do not believe in “the next world” at all, and in any case it is unclear how that world relates to this account’s focus on “immediate problems.” Furthermore, this view’s emphasis on the human desire to “understand and predict” the future, “to be sure what is going to happen,” reflects an overly constricted idea of the range of concerns that animate religious practices. In addition, not all religions conceive of their superhuman powers as “authorities,” and not all that do view them as necessarily “strong and benevolent.” Some religions’ superhuman powers are finite, fickle, or malicious. Moreover, not all religions involve “rigid, predictable rules.” Religions involve varying degrees of flexibility and customization in the application of prescribed practices—not to mention that “rules” are not the same thing as practices. Overall, while parts of it point in the right direction, Norris and Inglehart’s account of religion is sloppy and ill-informed. The definition offered in this chapter is more careful, precise, and widely applicable.

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have proposed a different approach to religion using a framework oriented around rational choice theory and social exchange. Their more complex approach defines religions as “very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods.”⁹⁰ They expect there to exist “an extensive collection of ideas, principles, myths, symbols, images, and other elements of religious culture built upon this base” of “general explanations of existence.” According to their view, “explanations are conceptual simplifications or models of reality that often provide plans designed to guide action.” In general, humans attempt to make rational choices that increase or maximize their “rewards.” “Because explanations help humans to maximize, in and of themselves explanations constitute rewards and will be sought by humans.” Rewards, however, are scarce and not available to all. Therefore, people tend to invent theories, both secular and religious, about rewards in the future that cannot presently be verified. Religious explanations and rewards are those that involve “the capacity to postpone the delivery of the rewards to an otherworldly context. . . . The truly potent religious resource is otherworldly rewards.” Those “are obtained only in a nonempirical (usually posthumous) context,” so it is “extremely difficult, if not impossible, for living humans to discover whether or not the rewards [will] arrive as promised.” Such otherworldly

90. Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*. Pp. 87–107 are the pages from which the quotes in this paragraph are taken.

rewards postulate the existence of “a supernatural being.” Therefore, “religion is concerned with the supernatural; everything else is secondary.” Supernatural “refers to forces or entities beyond or outside nature that can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces.” In the pursuit of rewards, “humans will seek to utilize and manipulate the supernatural.” Many supernatural beings are personal gods, which may be good, evil, or inconsistent. They vary in how responsive to human exchanges they are, and differ in the diversity and scope of their powers. Religious commitment refers to “the degree to which humans promptly meet the terms of exchange with a god or gods as specified by the explanations of a given religious organization.” Participating in religious rituals—that is, “collective ceremonies having a common focus and mood in which the common focus is on a god or gods, while the common mood varies”—increases people’s confidence in religious explanation.

Stark and Finke’s approach and my own are broadly similar in focusing on people engaging powers that are somehow above or beyond humans in order to realize some desired outcome that they believe they are unable to obtain on their own. Both also foreground substantive definitional elements (superhuman, otherworldly, supernatural) that provide content differentiating things religious from non-religious. And both emphasize human activities (practices, exchanges, rituals) that are required to obtain desired outcomes from the above-and-beyond powers. Past these broad parallels, however, the similarities break down and Stark and Finke’s approach proves problematic. By now the reader should recognize the main points of difference. “Superhuman” is the only term that captures the full range of religious premises, while “otherworldly” and “supernatural” apply to only some religions—again, other religions understand the superhuman powers they postulate as belonging entirely to the natural world. Religious practices also involve much more than exchanges, the latter being only one form of human interaction among others, not all of which are reducible to exchange.⁹¹ Also, it is not really possible to make an exchange with an impersonal superhuman power. The term “explanations of existence,” furthermore, sounds—like Bell’s definition above—too cognitive and intellectualist to represent all religions.

Moreover, the full breadth of things that humans seek from religion is not captured by the single concept of “rewards,” which tends in meaning

91. See Alan Fiske. 1993. *Structures of Social Life: Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. New York: Free Press.

toward either a narrow utilitarian emphasis on physical pleasure or else a tautologically vague notion of “whatever people want.” It is better, I suggest, to go beyond the limited range of rational choice vocabulary and rely on the fuller array of concepts that better represent real people’s actual interests. This means, in part, emphasizing concerns like blessings, misfortunes, and crises instead of “scarce rewards.” In any case, as I have already stated, religion is not only or even primarily about “other-worldly” rewards, but also everyday concerns. Thus, contra Stark and Finke, not all of religion’s promises are “nonempirical.” Some, such as healing from a disease or achieving peace of mind, are empirically verifiable to religious practitioners. Finally, Stark and Finke’s view of participating in religious rituals is misguided in multiple ways. Rituals are only one kind of religious practice, as noted above. The “ceremonies” of which rituals are said to consist need not be “collective,” since some religious practices are properly performed by individuals or very small groups. Religious rituals or practices may or may not increase people’s confidence in religious explanations—we should consider that an open empirical question, not take it as a theoretical presupposition. Even when they do increase people’s confidence in religious explanations, rituals are carried out not, in the main, for that purpose, but to access superhuman powers to solicit their blessings and help. While in some ways Stark and Finke are on the right track, on other important particulars their theory does not represent the reality of religion well.

Daniele Hervieu-Leger’s 2000 book, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, offers a creatively different view of religion.⁹² After spending 80 pages thoughtfully exploring existing definitions of religion and their problems, Hervieu-Leger proposes this approach: “A religion is an ideological, practical, and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled.” This agrees, she says, with proposals “to apply the term ‘religious’ to the form of believing whose distinguishing mark is to appeal to the legitimizing authority of a tradition.” For Hervieu-Leger, religious *beliefs* are central to defining religion. But she is weary of the established arguments between substantive and functional definitions of religion, and so recommends changing the basic terms of the debate. “I propose,” she writes, “to abandon the traditional markers—the content and function proper to religious belief—and concentrate on the

92. Daniele Hervieu-Leger. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. Pp. 82, 83.

type of legitimation applied to the act of believing, in order to attempt to specify religious believing itself. The assumption I shall make is that there is no religion without the *authority of a tradition* being invoked (whether explicitly, half-explicitly, or implicitly) in support of the act of believing.”⁹³ A religion is thus a system of beliefs continuing across time as a “chain of memory” that is legitimated specifically by the authority of tradition.

Readers will realize that by the account I am advocating, this definition is seriously deficient, however intelligent and original Hervieu-Leger’s book is generally. Not only must practices and not beliefs take center place in a widely applicable definition of religion, but also, her shift of focus away from the substance or function of religion to a “type of legitimation” creates more problems than it solves. Most crucially, there are all kinds of cultural forms that are legitimated by the authority of tradition that are not remotely “religious.” Hervieu-Leger’s account is indiscriminately inclusive in this way. Furthermore, far from grounding their authority on the weight of tradition, some new religious movements ground it on a new revelation of charismatic leadership. So her account is, on the other hand, too exclusive on this point. While I admire much of Hervieu-Leger’s theoretical reflections on religion in modernity, when it comes to defining religion, we must conclude that she confuses the question of religion’s ontology with that of its legitimation. What something *is* turns out to be a quite different matter than what gives it legitimacy, a point that Hervieu-Leger obscures. Besides keeping those subjects analytically distinct, I, again, following Riesebrodt, propose underlining the conceptual notions of religious *practices* and *super-human* powers, which Hervieu-Leger also neglects.

The fifth theory of religion that helps situate my own theoretical account comes from Steve Bruce, one of the few remaining advocates of traditional secularization theory. He defines religion as “beliefs, actions, and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu notion of karma, for example), which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs.”⁹⁴ This definition resembles the one advocated in this chapter, and shares several of its strengths. It is substantive but avoids the notions of “supernatural” and “transcendent.” By my lights, however, Bruce’s definition lacks clarity on a few key points. First, in some religions, the beings that have “powers of agency” are not limited to “gods,” but con-

93. Ibid. P. 76.

94. Steve Bruce. 2002. *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. P. 2.

tain a variety of types of agents, including spirits, demons, devils, angels, ghosts, deceased ancestors, and more. “Gods” is too narrow. Second, Bruce’s language of “beliefs, actions, and institutions” is good, but that ordering may privilege “beliefs” over “practices,” which is a misstep to be avoided. And the term “actions” fails to convey the culturally prescribed and repeated character of practices, which is important for understanding religion. Third, Bruce rightly notes that the personal and impersonal powers and processes can “set the conditions of” and “intervene in” human affairs; however, his definition does not explain why people predicate such powers and processes on which to build beliefs, actions, and institutions. I think a better definition overtly includes the idea of realizing goods and avoiding bads, especially seeking blessings and avoiding and coping with misfortunes and crises.

Sixth and finally, some early readers of this book’s manuscript asked me prior to its publication to explain how the definition of religion advanced above differs from the definition I proposed in my 2003 book, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. In that book, I defined religion as “sets of beliefs, symbols, and practices about the reality of superempirical orders that make claims to organize and guide human life.”⁹⁵ How the definition of religion that I currently advocate differs from this one is clear: It prioritizes practices over beliefs and symbols, it centers on the superhuman instead of the superempirical, it replaces “orders” with “powers,” and it shifts the purpose of religion away from moral order and instead toward deliverance and blessings. These changes do not signal an abandonment of my previous book’s concern with moral order (which shows up again in the next chapter of this book)—only a reconceptualization of moral order (as derived from religions) as framed within premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers and the human interest in gaining their help. Emphasis shifts away from moral order and cognition and toward navigating the problems and promises of everyday life. The revisions in my definition also reflect the growing influence of the philosophy of critical realism on me since 2003. My turn toward critical realism was in fact primarily spurred by inadequacies that I recognized in my own reasoning in parts of *Moral, Believing Animals*, particularly around the unacceptable consequences (namely, total cognitive and perhaps moral relativism) of my arguments concerning presuppositional epistemology (chapter 3) and the

95. Christian Smith. 2003. *Moral Believing Animals*. New York: Oxford University Press. P. 98.

foundational character of cultural narratives (chapter 4). Critical realism met and overcame those problems, and has significantly influenced my work since then. More simply and straightforwardly, in 2012 I read and re-read Martin Riesebrodt's book *The Promise of Salvation*, and his argument persuaded me that his approach was theoretically the best way to proceed. It was both more careful and robust than my previous thinking and the available alternatives, and thus caused me to revise my understanding of religion in ways that closely follow Riesebrodt's approach, as advanced in this chapter.

Religion

What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters

Christian Smith

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