Defining Religion(s)

Studying religion(s), necessitates defining what religion means. Defining the word "religion" is especially difficult. First, the term is extremely malleable. How "religion" is defined changes significantly depending on the context of the definition, including which religious tradition is defining the term, within which country/culture, and by which language. "Religion" defined in Provo, by Christians, in English, can be completely distinct from how religion is defined in Tokyo, by Buddhists, in Japanese. While everyone may assume a definition of religion(s), those assumptions may be individually distinct. Second, even within one tradition or culture, the definition of religion(s) often changes over time. Some have even argued that "religion" is a new term that has little relevance to cultures/traditions several centuries or millennia ago. Third, religion is often a normative term, defined to suggest not just what is, but what should be. Often religion can be defined strategically to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Because of these difficulties, religion theorist Robert D. Baird argued that it might be more effective to think of definitions of religion in *categories* rather than comparing individual definitions directly. Baird identified four different categories for defining religion(s).

Essential-intuitive definitions

Baird argued that essential-intuitive definitions are the most common among colloquial understandings of the term. Most people can identify religion(s) and use the word in conversation and may still struggle defining the word in the abstract. Essential-intuitive definitions are, at some level, a refusal of explicit definition within an assertion of "I know it when I see it" approach. Many have argued that this is an effective and appropriate approach for religion because the phenomena include events and experiences which are esoteric or ineffable, meaning that religion is often beyond verbal identification or linguistic understanding. Perhaps one should not rely on essential-intuitive definitions alone when engaging in comparative religion, but analysis of religion without the essential-intuitive category may not fully define religion or may dismiss parts of religious phenomena in order to establish a definitive definition within academic discourse. Many religions advocate for states of consciousness moving beyond the establishment of any definitive, including the explicit definition of terms. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) defined religion as a "state or feeling of ultimate dependence." Using this definition of religion, places limitations of the sensory and rational efficacy of the individual or group. If devotees maintain a definition of religion within this state, it is most likely within the essential-intuitive category.

Lexical definitions

This category could also be called dictionary definitions, which may be the central category for academic study. Baird argued that dictionaries, for academic research, do not provide the meaning of words, but rather, a history of use. Most dictionaries provide a snapshot of current use at the time they are published. More comprehensive dictionaries, like the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), will provide a chronology of each term, providing how words evolve in meaning and use. Some terms have static use and thus consistent meanings, but other terms change widely over time based on changing contexts. The longest entry in the OED is the word "set" where 60,000 words are necessary to explain how the word has evolved in use and meaning. The term "religion" in the OED is also quite extensive. Baird identified several eras in the chronology of meaning for religion.

Before the 17th century, the word "religion" was closely synonymous with how the word "church" is used today. If you asked someone, over 400 years ago, for a definition of religion in English or another European language, they would most likely reference the community Christian church. They may say that those who had religion, were those who engaged religion as a vocation, like priests and nuns. Religion would be seen as an institutional part of society and would be defined as a ubiquitous part of their lives, just like commerce, government, and family.

During the 17th century, the religious institutions in Europe came under intense scrutiny. The claims of religion were investigated by empirical methods and churches were critiqued for significant abuses and corruption. Extremely prolific Christian pastor, professor and apologist Friedrich Schleiermacher delivered a series of lectures compiled into a volume called, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. He argued that the definitions of religion(s) need to be expanded from the characteristics of institutions to the experiences of individuals. Schleiermacher's influence on religious hermeneutics and ethics was significant, and it has changed the way the term religion is used. Today, religion is often closer aligned to "faith" than "church" in colloquial use.

In the 20th century, the term religion linguistically evolved through the works of several theorists. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) did not engage religion directly, but his work on symbolic linguistics had a great effect on many terms, including religion. Saussure argued that language is a process of connecting the signifier and signified and that to be effective, language must be arbitrary, mutable, and immutable. Language is arbitrary in that there is no essential significance to the sounds which links the signifier and the signified,

which allows for words to evolve and change. Language, and the terms within them, are a complex mechanism with an internal logic, and cannot be changed at will. However, language has a collective inertia towards innovation and so words like religion, God, sin, holy, etc., are collectively re-invented, and continuously evolve. This led to many symbolic definitions of religion, in the later part of the 20th century, including Thoms O'Dea's, "Religion is a symbolic transformation of experience," Clifford Geertz's, "religion as both a symbolic and cultural system which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people," Catherine Albanese's, religion is "a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values," and Gerd Theissen's, "religion is a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality."

Saussure's work in symbolic linguistics provided new ways to compare and contrast religious phenomena among different cultures and languages and allowed for scholars to engage religious differences with more nuance and sophistication. On the downside, there are few limiting factors, which provide stability and orthodoxy for religion(s) definitions, leading Timothy Fitzgerald, in 2017, to conclude, "there is little or no agreement among academics on what religion is or is not."

While necessary, lexical definitions are certainly not definitive, when it comes to the academic engagement of terms like religion(s). In comparative religions, they are essential, as a starting point, for understanding religion(s) among different languages and for the way the term has changed through history in each of those languages.

Functional-stipulative Definitions

Due to the complexity brought about by 20th century definitions of religion(s), most academic studies use functional-stipulative definitions as a foundation for their research. Functional-stipulative definitions are also called operational definitions and they allow for theorists and scholars, and even ecclesial leaders and devotees, to assert a definition of religion for a specific purpose or context. Functional-stipulative definitions are generally, but temporarily, accepted by academic and devotional communities with little need for the asserted definition to be defended or justified. It is common, for scholars to start religious writings and discussions by proposing an operational definition for religion as well as other relevant terms for their research. Functional-stipulative definitions are significantly effective tools because they can be established for specific traditions and contexts and then adjusted or replaced when necessary or practical.

Baird identified two distinct categories of functional-stipulative definitions, irreducible and reductionist definitions. Irreducible definitions are classified as academic positions that allow room for the transcendent. While called by many names (divine, holy, metaphysical, God, sacred, supernatural, numen, etc.), they are definitions which claim that there is something authentic and essential to uniquely spiritual phenomena. The most well know irreducible definition of religion comes from Mircea Eliade. He argued that human beings are innately spiritual (homo religiosus) and that religion was irreducibly rooted in the experiences of the sacred, a reality that enters human life through events called hierophanies. Eliade is best known for claiming that religion must be studied/believed/practiced as "sui generis" or of its own type. Rudolf Otto was one of the most emphatic supporters of the value of irreducible definitions. In his work "The Idea of the Holy," he defined religion as arising from a core experience with the numinous. While distinct from reason and ethics, the numinous is described as the mysterium tremendum et fancinans—a profound, mysterious, and terrifyingly overwhelming reality that is both deeply awe-inspiring (entirely other) and utterly compelling (intimately personal). Otto claimed that everyone has these supra-rational experiences, although aspects of modernity has removed the self and environmental awareness necessary to understand the numinous. At the start of his book, Otto admonished the reader that if they could not agree that they had super-rational encounters with the holy, there was no point for them to read the rest of book. Social psychologist William James defined religion as, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." James did not argue that these experiences were ubiquitous, but rather special spiritual experiences sought by those he identified as "religious geniuses."

Reductionist definitions of religions are among some of the most influential modern theoretical explanations. Karl Marx reduced religion as an expression of the oppressed necessitated by economic injustice. If economic exploitation was resolved, religion would become extinct. Sigmund Freud reduced religion to individual and collective neuroses, based on infantile wish fulfillment and the basic human need to control the uncontrollable. Theories like Marx and Freud are classified as negative reductions or critiques of religion. Religion is seen as a problem resulting from institutional injustice or individual failings. Emile Durkheim provides a more positive reduction of religion. He argued that religion exists, perpetuates, and evolves as a system to sanctify and order communities. Religion plays essential social roles; and Durkheim argued that if religion was eradicated, humans would reinvent religion immediately.

Real Definitions

The last category is what Baird calls "real' definitions. These definitions are polemical tools used to designate certain groups or characteristics from being included or excluded from the "real" definition. Today, certain words like fascism, American, Christian, and religion are expressed using "real" definitions. Often the word "real" is used as a modifier for the term. For example, within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, arguments have been made that "real Mormons" are a part of a specific political party or position. Real definitions of Christian have been used to exclude groups who self-identify as Christian, like The Jehovah Witness and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Many theorists have promoted real definitions which argued that religions are institutions antithetical to human flourishing.

Baird concluded that one category is not intrinsically superior to another. Definitional categories of religion are utilized with different purposes and motivations and result in different benefits and detriments. Being able to categorize definitions of religion(s) allows the religious studies student and scholar to understand religious phenomena with more sophistication and nuance.

Definitions by Characteristics

In comparative religions, the term religion is commonly defined though identifying and organizing common characteristics. Stephen Prothero defined religion as the essential characteristics of 1. a problem, 2. a solution, 3. a technique, and 4. an exemplar. These characteristics are very useful for comparative analysis among distinct traditions, as illustrated in the table below:

	Christianity	**Buddhism**
A Problem	Sin	Suffering
A Solution	Salvation	Enlightenment
A Technique	Prayer	Meditation
An Exemplar	Jesus Christ	The Buddha

The characteristics themselves are effective methods for comparing distinct religious traditions. However, similar characteristics are often conflated as equivalents. It is true that sin and suffering are both problems. However, many well-intended students and scholars of comparative religions take it to the next step of equating sin and suffering as identical, which is tenuous. Categorical equivalents are often used for arguments that one religion is derivative of another. Most commonly, arguments are made that Asian religions

are derivative of Abrahamic traditions. A balance between common characteristics and distinct instances of those characteristics is necessary for appropriate comparative religious studies. In the 17th century, religious philosopher Edward Herbert of Cherbury identified 5 essential characteristics (common notions) of religion, 1. there is one God, 2. God ought to be worshipped, 3. virtue is the central human pursuit, 4. people should repent of their sins, and 5. There are rewards and punishments in the afterlife. Herbert argued that Christianity (Protestantism) was the best illustration of these characteristics because it represents the end of a progressive evolution of religious beliefs and practices. Those religions (other Abrahamic traditions) which, in some way, represent the common notions can be defined as religions, and those traditions which lack a clear link to the common notions are superstitions, philosophies, etc. Herbert's work, while tolerant and open-minded for its time, can provide evidence for prejudices and harm possible from defining religion through essential characteristics. In the 20th century, Paul Tillich defined religion with a characteristic that was much more egalitarian and boundless than most previous definitions. He argued that religion was an ultimate concern expressed as a first-order identifier. Whatever is an individual's or group's ultimate concern is their religion; this ultimate concern could be best be recognized by simply asking an individual or group, "what they are?" The question "what are you?," rather than "who are you?," establishes a first-order identifier, which is set by an ultimate concern. Until the late 20th century, this characteristic definition worked as expected, with most people answering the question, of "what you are" with traditional religious identities like Buddhist, Catholic, or Scientologist. Over the past 40 years, first order identifiers have expanded to race/ethnicity, political affiliations, sexual orientations, gender identities, etc. While many might disagree, Tillich would argue that rather than his definition losing validity, it was even more valid in perceiving that the term religion was expanding to include new churches based on politics, race, gender, or sexual orientation.

From all these possible ways to define religion, it becomes apparent that each has positives and negatives. It becomes the role of the religious studies student/scholar to optimize methods of definition in order to bring religion into greater clarity, identifying the commonalities and uniqueness of diverse religious phenomena.

An Operational Definition of Religion

In the wake of 9/11, University of Chicago Religion Professor Bruce Lincoln developed a definition of religion addressing the anxieties and critiques around what religions are, but more importantly, should be. Professor Lincoln argued that a proper definition of religion must be flexible to allow variations among religious traditions and organizations. At a minimum, religion(s) attend to four domains (quadrants) –

1. *A discourse* whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status. Discourse becomes religious, not simply by the virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority and truth. Within the discourse domain includes all the beliefs, scriptures, stories, history,

doctrines, folklore, etc., which makes a religious organization distinct and yet belonging to a family of similar traditions.

2. *Practices* whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects and defined by religious discourse to which these practices are connected. Each religion has as set of practices, both ethical and ritual, which distinguishes the religious organization and qualifies individuals as a part of the organization/tradition.

3. *A community* whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and it attendant practices. Most organizations focus community characteristics on patterns of familial and congregational bonds.

4. *An institution* that regulates discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value. Religious institutions are often divided between ecclesial and bureaucratic structures, and both are necessary for the vital perpetuation of religious phenomena and culture.

Bruce Linconln's Domains (Quadrants) of Religion

Discourse (Beliefs and Ideologies)	Community (Familial and Congregational)
Practices (Ethics and Rituals)	Institutions (Ecclesial and Bureaucratic)

Maximal / Minimal

Professor Lincoln also argued that religious fundamentalism can be measured in each of the domains by evaluating them on a spectrum between maximal and minimal. Maximal discourse, practices, community, and institutions are asserted as required/righteous both inside and outside religious affiliation. Minimal discourse, practice, community, and institutions are those that are adhered by individuals/groups as an essential part of their religious legitimacy but not required for non-members or even other members of the religion. While most religions would hold prohibitions on murder as maximal discourse/practice, dietary restrictions may be observed minimally. The more maximal each domain becomes, the more fundamentalist the religion will be inclined. This does not make a religion less legitimate but can be effective in measuring the tension the religious group will have with the surrounding society and possibly predict its tendencies for radicalism and violence.

For this World Religions course, Bruce Lincoln's domains/quadrants will be a starting operational definition, and will be used as a comparative tool to understand how the "world religions seven" (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism) are similar and yet distinct.

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