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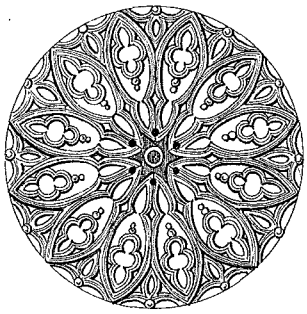
Gary E. Kessler
Professor Emeritus
State University–Bakersfield

CHAPTER 1



Thinking about Being a Student of Religion[1]

IT IS TEN O'CLOCK ON A Sunday morning in Toronto. A girl is beginning her Sunday school lesson. On Saturday, some Jewish boys in Florence were debating the meaning of commentaries on Genesis at a synagogue. In Philadelphia, Islamic students gathered at a mosque on Friday to pray and to recite the Quran. In Bangkok, a thirteen-year-old boy is memorizing some Buddhist scriptures in preparation for taking monastic vows.

1.1 INSIDER'S AND OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVES

Like the people I have just described, those of us who have read the Bible in Sunday school or synagogue school, or have recited the Quran in a mosque or Buddhist scriptures in a temple, have encountered religion from an insider's point of view. The **insider's viewpoint** is that of the participant in a religious tradition. The insider's approach presupposes religious commitment and promotes an understanding that will lead to greater commitment. It promotes the interests and furthers the causes of a specific religious organization.

There are numerous religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism (Taoism), Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, Parsi, Chinese popular religion, and many more. All of these constitute the subject matter of religious studies, or religion studies, as some prefer to call it.

The academic study of religion is different from the insider's approach. It is study done from the **outsider's viewpoint.** The student stands outside all religious traditions and studies religions using the methods and standards associated with the academic disciplines of the public university. The outsider's viewpoint does not presuppose any kind of religious commitment, although it does presuppose a commitment to the standards associated with the secular academy. Its goal is neither to increase nor to decrease an individual's religious faith, although it may have profound effects on that faith.

For the insider, the study of religion is itself a religious activity. For the outsider it is not, at least not in a sectarian sense. The difference between the two perspectives is like the difference between speaking a language and studying how a language is spoken. Studying is a **second-order activity** because it stands outside the actual **first-order activity** (speaking) that it seeks to understand. The academic study of religion is a second-order activity; it will not call on you to worship, but to observe those who do worship.

The controversial ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963) on prayer in public schools noted the difference between the insider's and outsider's perspectives by making a distinction between the **teaching of** versus the **teaching about religion.** The teaching of religion involves sectarian indoctrination, while teaching about it provides information without supporting any particular sect. Nothing, according to the Court, in the ruling prohibiting prayer in public schools, should be understood to forbid teaching *about* religion in public schools. What the public schools must avoid is the promotion of the viewpoint of a particular religious sect or group. If students in public schools come from a variety of religious backgrounds and if the United States is serious about the doctrine of religious freedom as stated in the First Amendment to the Constitution, then the public schools cannot promote one religious group over another.

If I were to ask you to list the advantages and disadvantages of the viewpoints of the insider and outsider, it would not take you long to create a list. On the one hand, the outsider's viewpoint provides a greater hope for achieving objectivity, which is particularly valuable when studying many different religions. On the other hand, the insider's viewpoint offers a greater hope for sympathetic understanding of one particular religious tradition. The insider can appreciate nuances and feelings that the observer can easily miss.

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The situation is like the relationship between you and a psychological counselor. You know yourself from the inside, as it were, and hence have an advantage like no one else when it comes to self-knowledge. However, your very intimacy can lead to self-deception, distortions, and blind spots that an outside, trained observer like a counselor can detect almost immediately. For example, it may take me a while to realize that I tend to be a defensive person, but a good counselor can probably detect my defensiveness within ten minutes of an initial interview.

There can be considerable conflict between the insider's view and the outsider's view. The values that each holds appear to be opposed. The outsider appeals to such values as critical reason, disinterested and unemotional judgment, impersonal observation, and detached analysis. The insider's approach certainly involves the use of reason, but it is tempered by a personal, sometimes passionate, religious commitment. At its worst the outsider's approach can lead to a radical depersonalization of the subject matter, taking the vitality out of religions by reducing them to factors far removed from living reality. For example, some scholars claim that religion originates in fear of unseen powers—that religious faith is just another form of fear. This hardly seems plausible given the richness and diversity of religions, even if fear does play a role in religions.

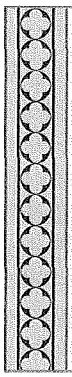
At its worst the insider's approach can become so defensive and so prejudicial that it ceases to be honest, distorting facts and ignoring or suppressing evidence. For example, some insiders regard all religions other than their own as the "work of Satan." This kind of attitude reduces the study of religion to a combination of **apologetics** (a defense of an individual's own religion) and polemics (an attack on the religion of others). It is, of course, quite appropriate to defend your religious viewpoint. But this is not the task of the academic study of religion. Its goal is not to defend religion or to attack it, but to understand it.

I have identified the academic study of religion with the outsider's viewpoint in contrast to the insider's viewpoint. However, the picture I have painted is distorted. None of us is completely inside or outside in our viewpoints. Even if we practice no religion, religious traditions and values have so permeated our cultures and societies that, like fish, we live in a sea already containing religious currents. There is no view totally outside everything and no view totally inside. These extremes are "ideal types." They characterize the ends of a continuum. The real situation is more complex. The outsider can be as prejudiced as the insider, although in a different direction.

The academic study of religion requires a scrupulous self-consciousness about how fairly we are treating others, others who may have very different values and beliefs from our own. To some extent the "other" is always threatening, and the "religious other" can be extremely threatening, because he or she is often a good person who believes in his or her way of life as sincerely as we believe in our own. It is difficult in such a situation to sustain the belief that other people are totally wrong religiously.

1.2 QUALITIES WORTH HAVING

The academic study of religion challenges the student of religion to develop certain qualities—qualities that aid in promoting fairness and sympathetic understanding of other people's faiths. In cultivating an outsider's perspective that treats religions fairly, we need to develop, among other things, the qualities of openness; honesty; critical intelligence; careful observing, reading, and listening; and critical tolerance. These qualities or virtues have cognitive value, leading to better knowledge. We will examine each of these qualities in turn.



It is conventional to use the generic singular *religion* instead of *religions* in such phrases as "the academic study of religion" and "the student of religion," and I will follow that convention. However, the use of the singular runs the danger of being misleading in two senses. First, it suggests there is some sort of *essence* to all the different religions, when there may not be such an essence, and second, it obscures the fact that the student must be the student of religions because comparative studies are such an important part of the academic study of religion(s).

Openness

To be open in the academic study of religion is to be prepared for surprises. Openness is a willingness to regard as tentative our views about religion. Openness is not a refusal to draw conclusions. To be open is to recognize that however helpful explanations and theories can be, they may be wrong and in need of revision as additional evidence comes to light. As students of religion we should welcome, as do students of physical science, evidence that we might be wrong, because if we are wrong, we have learned something new and thereby come that much closer to understanding.

Open-minded people recognize the fallibility of their beliefs. They realize that they might be wrong. Contrast this with closed-minded people, who fail to recognize their fallibility. They tend to be dogmatic and assume an air of infallibility.

Honesty

Honesty involves responsibility to others, to the subject matter, and to ourself. By *responsibility* I mean the ability to respond in a nonprejudicial way to what we learn. To be prejudiced is different from having a perspective. *Prejudice* means

prejudgment. *Perspective* means a particular slant, outlook, or point of view. Even the honest person has a perspective because human beings existing in time and space see, of necessity, what they take to be real from a certain viewpoint. There cannot be a view from nowhere, just as there cannot be a view from everywhere. However, the honest person understands his or her viewpoint, thereby attempting to overcome whatever limitations it might impose.

Honesty requires eliminating prejudices and taking responsibility for them. It also requires a willingness to understand the sources of prejudices. How do we acquire them? Why do we find them useful? How do they protect us? How do they influence what we do and believe?

Acknowledging a prejudice and its influence on us can be painful. It is frequently easier to hide behind the veil of objectivity. However, we cannot progress very far down the road of the academic study of religion until we confront as honestly as we can our prejudices. The openness described earlier and the critical intelligence examined next can aid in the process of becoming academically honest.

Critical Intelligence

Some may associate the word *critical* with a negative approach or an unfavorable judgment. However, I do not mean to indicate something negative by that term. To criticize is to evaluate by exercising careful judgment. Critical intelligence implies an effort to see things clearly so judgment can be rendered fairly. Evaluations may be positive or negative, but in an important sense the goal of all fair criticism is positive. We benefit by knowing when our judgments are right and when they are wrong.

Critical intelligence involves a number of different intellectual skills, including both analysis and synthesis. In analysis we seek to take things apart, to break wholes into more basic elements. Just as we might take a clock apart in order to see what makes it tick, engaging in the academic study of religion challenges us to take apart religious practices and beliefs to see what makes them work.

When analyzing a belief or practice, we seek to identify key elements that make up the whole. These elements depend on underlying assumptions. Finding the elements and their underlying assumptions is no easy task. For example, we might seek to identify the religious roles people play and uncover the assumptions of power on which those roles are based. This requires careful analysis of such matters as gender relations, privilege, and power.

There is more to critical intelligence than analysis. Synthesis—putting things back together again—is also required. This means being alert for the discovery of previously unseen relationships and for the sudden insight that what we took to be contradictions are reconciled in a greater harmony. Our tasks as academic students of religion are not only to analyze religion, but also to synthesize its various parts so that underlying and often unexpected relationships

come to light. The elements of a belief or practice always stand in relationship to other elements. Understanding how the elements work together is as important as understanding what the elements are. For example, if we know the priestly role in a certain rite is to mediate divine grace, then how that element functions in conjunction with other elements such as gestures of blessing and sprinkling holy water helps us grasp the meaning of the rite as a whole.

At the heart of critical intelligence is the pursuit of truth. Although we live in an age of relativism, when phrases like "the pursuit of truth" sound outdated, such a pursuit cannot be given up, even when we are uncertain there is any truth to be found. Criticism, be it positive or negative, is essential to any scholarly program of study.

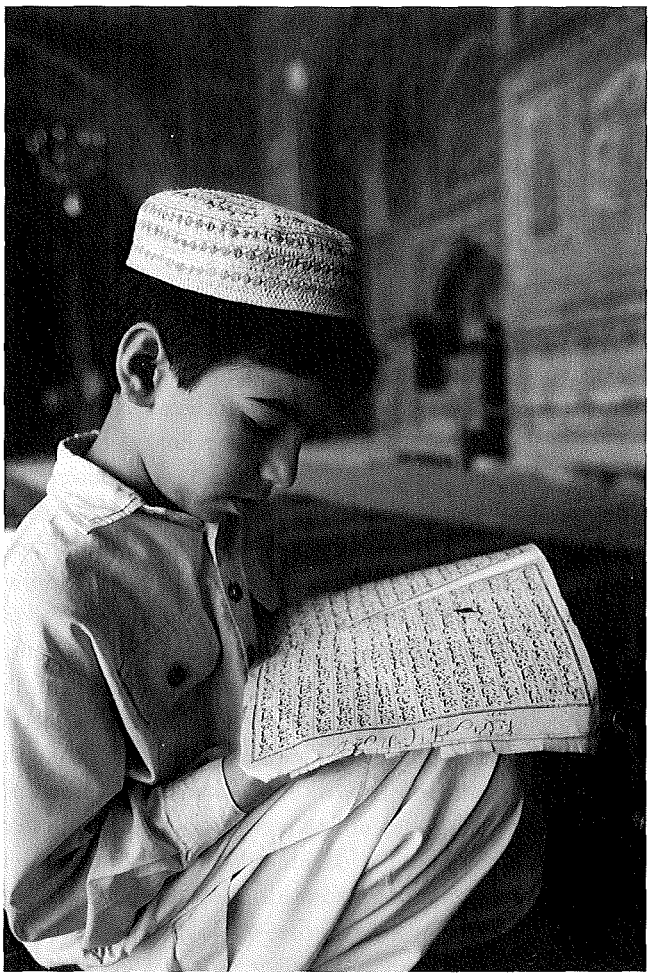
To look for truth in the study of religion necessitates criteria regarding what is going to count as truth. The task of articulating such criteria is by no means easy. However, there are generally accepted critical standards available (for example, consistency, use of good evidence, valid arguments) for what is to count as true; and the student of religion, as the student of biology, ought to employ these standards.

Arguments supporting a particular conclusion must be carefully examined to see if the premises are true and the conclusion actually follows from the premises. If someone claims that near-death experiences *prove* there is a life after death, we must ask if that is so. What do such experiences actually prove? How much can we safely infer from a near-death experience about an afterlife? What is the difference between *prove* and *provide evidence for*?

Consistency in theory and its application is a hallmark of the pursuit of truth. Evidence must be carefully examined for reliability. If I claim that fear is the essence of religion and explains the desire to be blessed by a priest, then I must also check for possible counterevidence and counterexamples, such as the incredible sense of joy and release experienced by those who feel forgiven. Claims need to be appropriately qualified and modified in light of evidence. Rigorous experiments such as the kind found in the physical sciences are seldom possible in the academic study of religion, but that does not mean that all checking procedures are impossible.

We also need to check the precision of our terms. What do we mean by *religion*, and by *fear*? Can these terms be defined precisely enough to be useful? We do not know whether the admonition of some religions to "fear God" counts as evidence for the claim that fear is the essence of religion unless we know that the fear we are talking about and the fear they are talking about mean the same thing. We do not know whether the joy of forgiveness that people experience is a good counterexample to claims about fear residing at the heart of religion until we know how joy and fear might be related. Does the joy of forgiveness require the fear of damnation?

Crucial to the search for truth is the ability to question. Most of us are too easily satisfied with superficial answers and stop questioning too soon. The



Boy studying the Quran

willingness to continue to raise questions even when we think we understand and to pursue alternative answers is an indispensable tool in the quest for truth.

Careful Observing, Reading, and Listening

Developing the qualities of careful observing, reading, and listening sounds simple enough. However, actions, comments, questions, and textual materials are often deceptive. The actions or words say one thing, but the person behind the actions or words may be saying something else. Learning to see, to read, and to listen for the hidden meanings is especially important when dealing with religious art and religious texts. **Sacred** writings and art of all varieties contain many different levels of meaning. We can train our eyes and ears to become sensitive to as many different levels of meaning as possible.

There is great joy in studying religions when a new level of meaning in some familiar saying or ritual action surprises us. Religious rituals and experiences contain a symbolic richness that will unfold for the student who observes, reads, and listens carefully.

Careful observing, reading, and listening require sympathetic imagination. Imagination is one of our greatest assets. As children it was through imagination that we began to chart that vast unknown world of the experiences of adults. Playing teacher or astronaut is a way of trying to see what the world is like from the perspective of someone who is different from us. Through imagination we can project ourselves, at least partially, into the worldview of a **shaman** doing magical healing, a yogi in meditation, a prophet proclaiming a judgment, and a Christian or a Muslim at prayer.

The ability to imagine—to play, to make believe—is invaluable as we struggle to comprehend cultures, beliefs, practices, and experiences that seem different and strange. Sympathetic imagination requires projecting ourselves into the viewpoint of others and trying to see the world from their perspective. Insofar as we all share in a common humanity and a common world, such a projection is possible and valuable.

At the same time, beware of the limits of imagination. Projection can easily lead to distortion. For example, some early scholars, following missionary leads, equated the Lakota Sioux notion of Wakan Tanka, which they translated as "Great Spirit," with the idea of a monotheistic god as understood in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Wakan Tanka is better translated as "Great Mysteriousness." It is a collective name for a number of different "*wakan* (powerful and sacred) beings." To identify Wakan Tanka with the monotheistic god of nonnative religious traditions obscures important and instructive differences.

Critical Tolerance

Many who study and teach about religions hope to promote religious tolerance. Religious tolerance is a culturally approved, public virtue that allows all of us to get along in greater harmony than does religious intolerance. Religious tolerance not only permits, but also encourages the free expression and practice of diverse religious traditions. In a diverse society in which a vast variety of religious traditions exist side by side, the alternative to religious tolerance appears to be bigotry and strife.

We are so accustomed, however, to thinking of religious tolerance as a public good that we often fail to address difficult underlying issues. We tend to think of religious tolerance superficially as a kind of happy acceptance, if not approval, of religious differences.

A superficial view of toleration ignores two underlying problems. First, there are religious traditions of which people disapprove whether we think they ought to or not. Second, there are religious beliefs and practices of which

we think people ought to disapprove. Few of us would advocate neglecting the medical needs of a child, even if religious reasons are given. Few of us would approve of physical mutilation, even if it is a long-standing practice in one or another sacred tradition.

Students of religion cannot be content advocating an uncritical religious and moral tolerance. Rather, they must seek to develop a **critical tolerance** that endorses freedom of religion but does not automatically approve of any and all religious beliefs and practices.

Sympathetic imagination and keeping an open mind are indispensable in studying religion, but they need to be balanced by critical intelligence. Sympathetic imagination and openness promote tolerance for those who are different, and critical intelligence promotes a tolerance tempered by evaluation. We can and should come to understand religious tragedies such as Jonestown, where people committed mass suicide, or Waco, Texas, where David Koresh and his followers were plunged into a fiery and deadly encounter with the U.S. government, but we cannot condone mass suicide and violence.

Sometimes it is easy to know where to draw the line between understanding and tolerance. At other times it is more difficult. We can understand why some religions sacrificed humans and thought it was right to do so, and we have no difficulty condemning such a practice should it occur today. However, what should we say about the sacrifice of animals, which still takes place in religious settings? Should it be tolerated or condemned? Should we tolerate sects that advocate the use of physical punishment in order to discipline children? When does physical punishment become physical abuse "in the name of God"?

As these questions indicate, there is no simple way to balance sympathetic understanding and critical intelligence in all situations. Although this is no easy task, it is a challenge worth meeting. Studying religion challenges us to examine the limits of toleration. Openness demands a willingness to suspend what might be our immediate moral and religious disapproval in order to understand more deeply.

We cannot, however, suspend our disapproval forever and in all cases. Sometimes, as our understanding deepens, our disapproval will lessen. Eventually it may seem to us just plain silly to condemn certain religious beliefs and practices. Do we really want to fight religious wars over how someone is baptized? Sometimes, however, even after we have understood as deeply as we can, we find ourselves unable to condone, let alone support, certain religious beliefs and practices. Do we really want to support the denial of equal religious rights to women? Perhaps we can do little more than advocate the right of those who are oppressed by a religious group to leave that group if they should so desire. Forcing people to accept ideas and practices they find oppressive is incompatible with human dignity and worth. However, respect for difference and the right to be different requires that we be careful in religious matters. Critical tolerance is necessary, but not easy.

Qualities Worth Having

1. Openness
2. Honesty
3. Critical intelligence
4. Careful observing, reading, and listening
5. Critical tolerance

1.3 WHY STUDY RELIGION?

Many of you are taking an introductory course in the study of religion because it fulfills some sort of *general education* requirement. You are reading this book in conjunction with that course and, perhaps, wondering what this course has to do with getting a job and making money after graduation. Many people believe that if it "bakes no bread" it's useless.

Some of you may not be thinking along those lines. You may be thinking that college education is more than vocational training, and it is worthwhile to study subjects that may have no immediate or obvious practical application. You may be thinking that the *study of religion helps us understand a force that influences, for good or for ill, the lives of practically everyone who is alive.*

So much of human history and culture remains a mystery if we cannot comprehend the role religion has played and continues to play in the development of human institutions, values, and behavior. American culture, for example, cannot be fully understood without knowing something about the role that Christianity played in shaping its political, judicial, and educational institutions, not to mention its role in establishing such values as individual freedom and human rights. In America, religious ideas were used both to promote the destruction of indigenous peoples and to end it, to promote slavery and to stop it.

In addition to helping understand the role religion has played and continues to play in human history, studying religion, especially the religions of others, helps us overcome our all-too-comfortable ethnocentric attitudes and achieve a more global and multicultural perspective. *Developing a global perspective* is particularly important at a time when advanced technologies make it possible to travel to places and communicate with peoples about which past generations could only read. National borders are increasingly porous as people immigrate from one country to another. As multinational corporations rapidly create a global economy, we cannot avoid beginning to see ourselves as citizens of the world, or *cosmopolitans* (as the Greeks would say), in addition to members of different cultures and ethnic groups. It is as likely that someday some of us may be living and doing business in China or the Middle East as living and working in the United States, Mexico, or Canada. Mosques spring

up down the street from Christian churches, and Hindu temples find their place in communities that once knew only synagogues and churches.

The idea of developing a global perspective is closely tied to yet another reason for studying religion: *the development of a comparative perspective.* Comparison is an indispensable tool for the student of religion. It is, however, more than just an academic tool that increases our knowledge. It also develops understanding, not just of others but of ourselves as well. Just as we learn more about our own languages and cultures by studying the languages and cultures of others, so we learn more about our own religion and values by understanding them in contrast to the religions and values of others. F. Max Müller (1823–1900), an influential linguist and historian of religions, liked to apply to the study of religion what Johann von Goethe applied to the study of language, "he who knows one . . . knows none."[2] Comparative understanding enriches our lives and aids in the search for a more humane way to live together on an increasingly overcrowded, violent, and polluted planet.

As a young student of religion, having been schooled in the Lutheran tradition of Christianity, I recall thinking, when I began the study of the Buddhist concept of "letting go of attachments," that I now understand more deeply what Martin Luther, one of the sixteenth-century founders of the Protestant Reformation, meant when he claimed that the heart of the Christian gospel is justification by faith, not by works. Luther counseled that we should give up trying to work our way into heaven. We cannot make it on our "own power." Buddhists would say we need to "let go" of that attachment.

In addition to expanding our understanding of the significant role religion plays in shaping human history and aiding us in developing a global and comparative perspective, the study of religion opens up a space in our busy lives where we can pause and *reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives.* It provides an occasion for us to think, in a comparative setting, about what constitutes the good life. By comparing and evaluating what others have said about how humans should conduct themselves, we are in a better position to develop a reflective philosophy of life. Most of us are too busy living our lives to give much thought to how we *should* live. Although the academic study of religion cannot provide answers to the "big questions" about the purpose of human existence, it can help us understand the answers different religions have given to where we came from, how we should live, and where we are going. Studying religion provides a space in which to compare what we have been taught by our own religious traditions with what other traditions say.

Finally, I would add that it is not entirely true that the study of religion "bakes no bread." Most of you will not go into vocations that directly involve the use of expertise about religion, but some of you will. The academic study of *religion does prepare you for a career* if you become professionally interested in the field. It also aids in preparation for other kinds of careers. A wide variety of employers are looking for people who are tolerant of diversity, are able to

learn from others, are adaptable to new situations, and have knowledge of history and international affairs. Studying religion can help cultivate the qualities many employers find attractive.

Why Study Religion?

1. To satisfy a requirement for general or liberal education
2. To discover the important role religion plays in the development of history and culture
3. To develop a global perspective
4. To develop a comparative perspective
5. To have an occasion to reflect on the meaning of the good life
6. To prepare for a career in the field of religious studies and other fields

REVIEW QUESTIONS

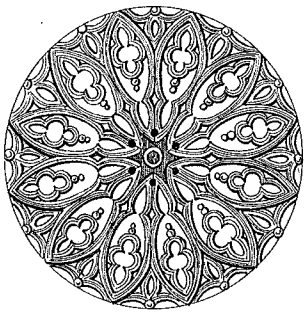
1. What are the basic differences between the insider's and the outsider's perspective?
2. What is the relationship between openness and honesty?
3. How do analysis and synthesis differ, and how are they related? Give an example of each.
4. What role does sympathetic imagination play in careful observing, reading, and listening?
5. What is critical tolerance? Give an example.
6. Why do you want to study religion, and how do your motives relate to the reasons given for studying religion discussed in this chapter?

EXPLORATIONS

Near the close of the first two chapters I will pose questions to ponder. These "explorations," as I call them, invite you to think more deeply about key issues. Jot down your answers. Compare your answers with those of your classmates, and make a sincere effort to think beyond what I have said.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosopher, wrote an essay entitled "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?" Imagine that you have been asked to write an essay with the same title. What would you say, and what reasons would you provide to support what you say?
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a historian of religion and Islamic scholar, once said that no statement made by a scholar of religion is valid unless a religious believer could accept it as correct. Do you agree? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 2



On Defining and Studying Religion

THE QUESTION "WHAT is religion?" is deceptively simple. Most people think they know what religion is. You can look it up in a dictionary and find what is called a lexical definition. If I asked you to write a one-sentence definition, you could do so after a little thought. So, what is the problem with defining religion?

2.1 MARKS OF A GOOD DEFINITION

For the student of religion, not just any sort of definition will do. In order to engage in the academic study of religion, we need a definition that is analytically useful. That means it should be

- Useful for the purposes at hand
- As precise as possible without being too narrow in scope
- As free from bias as possible

Usefulness

Definitions are not necessarily true or false, but more or less useful. They tell us how to use words effectively depending on the situation and what we are trying to communicate. For example, historians who wish to study religious beliefs and practices (such as rites, moral behavior, aesthetic or artistic

creations) that characterized people in China two thousand years ago may find one kind of definition useful for their purposes. A sociologist who wishes to describe social influences on religious practices in contemporary England may find another kind of definition useful.

Suppose sociologists or psychologists were interested in measuring religiosity, that is, the degree to which someone is religious. They would need a definition of religion that could be empirically tested (operationalized) by asking specific questions whose answers could be statistically measured. If they defined religion as "belief in God," they could operationalize this definition by creating questions about what people believe, such as "Do you believe in God?" This would be a *unidimensional* measure because only one dimension, the belief dimension, is central to the definition.

A questionnaire based on this single dimension would be of limited use because there is more than one way to be religious. Someone might believe in God, but never pray to God, offer devotion to God, strive to live a godly life, or participate in any way in organizations that promote such beliefs. Would the researchers want to call such a person "religious"? Then again, some people might be uncertain about whether they genuinely believe in God, but they might pray, read religious literature, and strive to live a moral life as they think God requires. Would such people be called "irreligious" because they did not score very high on the belief dimension?

It is clear that the definition of religion as "belief in God" is not very useful when it comes to measuring religiosity. What is needed is a *multidimensional* approach that measures, in addition to belief, religious practice, experience, devotion, knowledge, and more. Hence a more complex definition of religion is required if it is going to be useful to social scientists interested in creating measures of religiosity.

For scholarly purposes, definitions should stimulate further investigation and thought. Different academic disciplines—history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, literature, philosophy—will find different definitions more or less useful, depending on their perspective. Given these circumstances, the quest for one universal definition of religion that can be useful for all academic disciplines appears misguided.

You might be thinking that what I have just said does not sound quite right. What if the definition the historian uses and the definition the sociologist uses are totally different? How could we be sure that they were both studying religion rather than two very different things? That is a good question and leads directly to a discussion of precision.

Precision

The purpose of definitions is to draw boundaries and thereby limit a field of study. If everything fell under the category of religion, the study of religion would become quite impossible to manage. Definitions can be too precise,

however, and boundaries drawn so narrowly that they exclude some things that ought to be included. For example, the above definition of religion as "belief in God" leaves out too much of importance, such as religious practices. Religions are more than belief systems; they involve **ritual** practices, moral codes, various types of social organizations, and more. In addition, religions that deny that ultimate reality is divine (some types of Buddhism), or those that center on beliefs in spirits, would be unjustifiably excluded.

The other side of the coin is drawing boundaries too broadly. Some scholars have favored definitions that involve the use of terms like *ultimate concern* or *sacred*. Unless carefully specified, these terms are so vague that practically anything can fit within their boundaries. Are capitalists, who devote their lives to the pursuit of wealth, religious because money and the power it brings have become their ultimate concern? Are socialists, who devote their lives to the equal distribution of wealth, religious because economic justice is a sacred cause for the socialist?

The questions and problems associated with precision are closely tied to two very different theories of the nature of definition. Some scholars hold to a theory of essentialism. For them, the purpose of definitions is to state the essence of something. The **essence** is a universal quality or set of qualities that makes something what it is and not something else. For example, the essence of a table is whatever characteristic(s) it must have in order to be a table and not a chair. The essence of a human being is whatever qualities or characteristics humans must have in order to be human and not a tree or a rock.

Those who pursue essential definitions of religion usually favor either a **substantive definition** that states what religion *is* or a **functional definition** that states what religion *does*. For example, if we defined religion as "belief in the supernatural," we would be stating what we think it is, or what its nature is. This substantive definition distinguishes religious belief from other sorts of belief in terms of objects. According to this definition, religious belief differs from other types of belief because its object is the supernatural. That is its essence, or substance. If we defined religion as a "set of beliefs that give meaning and purpose to human life," we would be stating what religion does, or how it functions. Its function is to provide meaning and purpose to human life. According to this definition, the essence of religion is in what it accomplishes. This example of a functional definition differentiates religious beliefs from other beliefs by stating what they do (provide meaning and purpose to human life), which is, presumably, different from what other sorts of beliefs do.

There are problems with both substantive and functional definitions. Substantive types often turn out to be too narrow because of the vast diversity of religious beliefs and practices, and functional types often turn out to be too broad because different things can often function in the same way. For example, political beliefs as well as religious beliefs can give meaning and purpose to human life.

A very different theory of definition rejects the idea of essences. According to this theory, we should look for a cluster of characteristics that makes something part of a certain family. **Cluster definitions** are based on an analogy with families. Families are made up of many members who have many different traits or qualities. Some are blue-eyed, and some brown-eyed. Some are tall, and some are short. Yet, in spite of these differences, they are all members of the same family. There may be no set of traits that are essential, but there are traits that allow us to group them into the same family. There are, to borrow Ludwig Wittgenstein's term, "family resemblances."

Perhaps religion is like a family. There are many members with many different characteristics but no set of characteristics that captures some essence. Those who favor cluster definitions of religion readily acknowledge that the boundaries between religion and other things, such as politics, are fuzzy. There is no sharp line of demarcation, but a kind of fading away of qualities until there are not enough to fit into the "family" of religion.

William P. Alston, a contemporary philosopher of religion, offers a cluster definition consisting of nine "religion-making" characteristics. No single characteristic, including belief in supernatural beings, constitutes an essence. In other words, there can be religions that do not posit a supernatural reality. Here are Alston's nine characteristics:

1. Belief in supernatural beings (gods).
2. A distinction between sacred and profane objects.
3. Ritual acts focused on sacred objects.
4. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods.
5. Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during the practice of ritual, and which are connected in idea with the gods.
6. Prayer and other forms of communication with gods.
7. A worldview, or a general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual therein. This picture contains some specification of an overall purpose or point of the world and an indication of how the individual fits into it.
8. A more or less total organization of one's life based on the worldview.
9. A social group bound together by the above.[1]

Alston calls these characteristics religion-making because they contribute to making something a religion. Precision, he admits, is not possible. For example, we cannot say that for x to be a religion, the first two plus three other characteristics must be present. Nor can we say that before x qualifies as a religion, it must exhibit five of these nine traits. The most we can say is that when enough of these characteristics are present, we have a religion.

What is enough? That must be an informed judgment made by scholars who are familiar with a wide range of religions. Cluster definitions avoid the problems of being too narrow or too broad that plague essential definitions. However, they do so at the price of precision. Still, they are not so imprecise that they cease to be useful for scholarly purposes.

Freedom from Bias

Useful definitions of religion should be as free from bias as possible. None of us can totally escape our biases because we must necessarily study the subject matter from some perspective. However, we can become aware of our biases. This awareness allows us to correct for bias when we formulate definitions.

Western Bias One common bias can be called the Western bias. It is very subtle (as many biases are), and to unmask it will take careful analysis. The English word *religion* comes from the Latin word **religio**. Latin scholars are not certain about the etymology of *religio*. Some believe it stems from the root *leig*, meaning "to bind," while others think it comes from roots meaning "to reread" or "to be careful." In early Roman Latin usage, *religio* was a cultic term referring primarily to the careful performance of ritual obligations. This sense survives in the English adverbial use of *religiously* in such sentences as, "She walks her dog every morning religiously."

Early Latin Christians used the word *religio* to distinguish true worship from false. For them, *religio* did not refer to the world religions as it does today, but to genuine and sincere worship. In the Middle Ages, *religio* was not widely used, but when it was, it often referred to "the religious," that is, those who chose the monastic life. Hence *religio* distinguished the monastic life from the life of the laity.

With the dawn of the modern age, when knowledge of and encounters with religions different from Christianity increased, the word *religion* began to be used to refer to the various religious traditions of the world. So, for example, we often speak of the world's religions, meaning such traditions as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism—to mention only a few.

The word *religion* is also used in many other ways in English, but we are not concerned with all of them here. Given the close association the word *religion* has with the development of Western culture, it is not surprising that some scholars have proposed dropping the use of the word altogether for scholarly purposes. It is tied, they argue, too deeply to Western biases and has such a wide variety of meanings in common speech that precision is impossible. Benson Saler, an anthropologist, summarizes this view when he writes, "the practitioners of a mostly Western profession (anthropology) employ a Western category (religion), conceptualized as a component of a larger

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Western category (culture), to achieve their professional goal of coming to understand what is meaningful and important for non-Western peoples."[2]

Correcting for the ethnicity of the idea of religion is not easy. If we do not use the word *religion*, what word should we use? Are *faith* or *tradition* any more free from a Western bias? Probably the best we can do is recognize that ethnocentric ideas are starting points (we have to start from our own culture, whatever it may be), but ethnocentrism should not be a stopping point. If it is, it shows we have not learned anything about our biases.

Value Bias Complicating this ethnocentric bias is a value bias. Definitions reflect how the people creating them value religion. If their attitude is positive, the definition will be positive. If their attitude is negative, the definition will be negative, and if their attitude is mixed or uncertain, their definition will reflect that too. For example, if I defined religion as an illusory hope for eternal life, you would immediately detect a negative attitude in my definition.

We can correct our value biases by adding qualifying words like *allegedly, presumably,* or *maybe.* Thus I might revise my definition of religion to "the hope for eternal life, a hope that may or may not prove to be an illusion." Once you become sensitive to value biases, rewording with appropriate qualifications often does the trick.

Theory Bias Every definition of religion is part of a more general theory of religion. A definition is "theory-laden," to use the technical term. Behind every definition is some theory about what religion is and how it functions. This is not a bad thing, and indeed it is unavoidable. However, we need to be aware of the ways (some obvious and some not so obvious) that theory influences definition. For example, some theories hold that there is something irreducibly "religious" about religion. Religion is unique and can be understood only on its own ground. Other theories claim that religions are like any other human phenomena and can be understood in cultural, historical, sociological, or psychological terms. According to these theories, there is nothing uniquely religious about what humans believe or do. General psychological theories of human behavior, for example, can explain quite well why people act in religious ways. These two divergent theories of religion generate very different definitions.

Gender Bias Still another subtle bias that slips into both theory and definition is gender bias. Historically, males have dominated religions, and when people think about religion they often take as the implicit model traditional patriarchal religions. Theories and definitions are then constructed under the influence of these models, and gender bias is the result. Even the word *God* implies for many a male figure. Gender bias inclines people to think of religions as having to do with belief in God or gods, rather than belief in

goddesses. One unfortunate social and cultural effect of this is to encourage people to think of males as rulers and leaders. As the feminist theologian Mary Daly says, "if God is male, then the male is God."[3]

Confusion of Religion and Spirituality Another bias that slips into definitions is the confusion between spirituality and religion. Consider these two statements:

1. A person can belong to a religion and not be religious.
2. A person can be religious and not belong to a religion.

The key term is "belong to." If "belong to" means being an official member of some organization, then statement 1 seems obviously true. The second statement is more problematic because a case could be made that the truly spiritual person will seek membership in some religious community because religious communities try to foster spirituality and provide an opportunity for spiritual fellowship. It is undoubtedly true that religious organizations present themselves as a path, or way, that fosters growth in spirituality, but there seems to be no good reason why someone could not foster spiritual growth in ways other than belonging to some religious group.

Crucial to this debate about **spirituality versus religion,** is a clear distinction between the two. If defining religion is difficult, defining spirituality is even more difficult. The situation is complicated by the fact that the adjective *religious* is used interchangeably with *spiritual.* To be spiritual is to be deeply and genuinely religious. But how can someone be religious without religion?

There have been various attempts to define spirituality. The psychologist of religion William James (1842–1910) suggested that it is a quest for a transformation from a state of perceived wrongness to a state of perceived rightness by making contact with some higher power or powers. The contemporary philosopher John Hick thinks of spirituality as a transformation from a selfish and egocentric state to an unselfish and caring state. However, all of these terms are vague and notoriously difficult to make precise. Nevertheless, I think it is important not to confuse religion and spirituality as if they amounted to the same thing. When we do, we are tempted to transfer whatever negative qualities we may associate with religious organizations to people who sincerely seek to make a better life for themselves and others.

The two statements I asked you to consider earlier (a person can belong to a religion and not be religious; a person can be religious and not belong to a religion) presuppose that spirituality or religiousness is best thought of as a personal quality—a characteristic or set of characteristics that some people have. They also presuppose that religion refers to an organized group of people. This organized group presents itself as an effective way to nurture the personal quality of spirituality, but it is always possible that it fails to do so or, at least, fails to satisfy the spiritual desires of those who join. The problem of

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how religion and spirituality are related is, to some extent, a product of how we conceptualize them.

Something close to our distinction between spirituality and religion is the ancient Roman distinction (derived from the Greeks) between *cultus* and *pietas*. *Cultus* refers to religion as a cultural system consisting of things like creeds, moral codes, rites, and an organized group. *Pietas* refers to religion as a personal quality of devotion. However, in the ancient world, the modern notion that someone could be spiritual (*pietas*) and not belong to an organized group (*cultus*) would be unthinkable. In the modern world religion is becoming less public and more privatized due to a number of factors that I will talk about in more detail in the last chapter.

Some Possible Biases

1. Western ethnocentric bias
2. Value bias
3. Theory bias
4. Gender bias
5. Confusion of spirituality and religion

2.2 TWO DEFINITIONS

In our discussion about defining religion, we have discovered there are some typical problems with different types of definitions. We can put our discoveries to work by critically analyzing two important and influential definitions. I want you to assume the role of analyst and critic. We learn to do religious studies by engaging in its practice, and part of that practice is the critical analysis of definitions. I will prompt you, but you need to do the work.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965), a Christian theologian and philosopher, defined religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life."[4]

Questions on Tillich's Definition

Please answer the following questions. In all cases support your answer by stating your reasoning.

1. What kind of definition is this—essential or cluster?
2. Is Tillich concerned with the substance or the function of religion?
3. Is Tillich's definition too broad or too narrow?
4. Do you detect any bias in Tillich's definition? If so, what?

5. Suppose someone is ultra patriotic, as people often are in time of war. Does this mean, if we used Tillich's definition, that we should count nationalism and patriotism as religions?

We turn now to an influential definition by the contemporary anthropologist Melford E. Spiro. According to Spiro, religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[5]

Questions on Spiro's Definition

Please answer the following questions. In all cases support your answer by stating your reasoning.

1. Is Spiro's definition functional or substantive?
2. Is Spiro's definition too broad or too narrow?
3. Compare Spiro's reference to "superhuman beings" to Tillich's use of "ultimate concern"? Are they the same or different?
4. Substitute the word *politics* for *religion* and reread Spiro's definition. Does it make sense as a definition of politics?
5. Do you detect any bias in Spiro's definition? If so, what?
6. Which definition, Tillich's or Spiro's, do you find most useful?

2.3 IS SECULAR HUMANISM A RELIGION?

Developing skills in analyzing and evaluating definitions is not an abstract and irrelevant activity because definitions make a difference. There can be important political, legal, and social implications. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court decision against government-mandated prayer and Bible reading in public schools in 1963 set off a firestorm (see section 1.1). It is instructive to take a closer look at this case.

Many conservative Protestant Christians protested the decision and became alarmed that government was abridging their religious freedom and further secularizing what they believed was the Founders' intention of establishing a "Christian nation."* Knowing full well that religion is something one learns and having enjoyed a public education system that nominally reinforced a generally Protestant Christian viewpoint, conservative Protestants thought they saw in this decision one more step in the drift away from God in American society. They named this drift "secular humanism" and argued that by rejecting state-mandated Bible reading and prayer in public schools the Supreme Court was not upholding the First Amendment but was violating it. The Court's ruling, they argued, amounted to supporting and legally mandating an "anti-Christian religion" they called secular humanism. The First

* See Chapter 10 for more information on the controversies surrounding the First Amendment.

Amendment to the Constitution forbids the "establishment" of religion, and the 1963 decision on prayer and Bible reading is, they claimed, inconsistent with that amendment. The First Amendment reads, in part, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . ."[6]

The argument mounted by conservative Protestants asserted that the decision to prohibit prayer and Bible reading in public schools not only violated their right to "the free exercise" of religion, but also established the anti-Christian religion of secular humanism.

Bill Bright (1920–2003), founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ, expressed the fear of conservative Christians when he wrote

> Have you ever wondered why our society is becoming more secular, why prayer and Bible reading are no longer welcome at our public schools? The religion of humanism is largely responsible. Have you wondered why Americans are much more tolerant today of sexual freedom, homosexuality, incest and abortion? The religion of humanism is largely responsible.[7]

Tim LaHaye, best known as co-author of the best-selling *Left Behind* series of novels that describe the torments of those not raptured at the Second Coming of Christ, echoes Bright's fear in his book *The Battle for the Family.* LaHaye portrays secular humanism as an octopus whose tentacles engulf the family, schools, universities, liberal churches, government, and television. He lays the "evils" of feminism, materialism, pornography, drug abuse, rock music, homosexuality, and, in general, the decay of the moral fiber of Americans at the doorstep of secular humanism. He defines secular humanism as "a man-centered [sic] religion that mistakenly thinks it can solve the problems of man [sic], independent of God."[8] LaHaye adds that it is "the most fraudulently evil religion in our country today" and is regarded with "awe" in colleges and universities. War metaphors abound as the title suggests. Secular humanism is an evil "enemy" that must be "battled" by pious Christians in a "war" to recover and reestablish the "biblical base" of America.

LaHaye is echoing a comment made by Justice Stewart, the one dissenter in an eight to one majority Court opinion who said, ". . . a refusal to permit religious exercises thus is seen, not as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of a religion of secularism, or, at least, as governmental support of the beliefs of those who think that religious exercises should be conducted only in private."[9]

Those who supported the Supreme Court decision argued that the practice of prayer and Bible reading unfairly established the Christian religion as the official religion taught to students in public education. American students are religiously diverse. While the vast majority might be Christian, many are not. Some are Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Native American. Some are atheists. Given the religious pluralism of American culture, imposing by

law mandatory prayer and Bible reading violated the rights on non-Christian students.[10] They furthered argued that so-called secular humanism is not a religion, as conservative opponents of the Court's ruling claimed. It has no creed, no ritual, and no organization—in short, none of the usual characteristics associated with religion. It is merely an abstract idea created by conservatives in order to support their arguments. Supporters of the decision also reject the conservative contention that the Founders of the United States intended it to be a Christian country. They obviously recognized the religious diversity of the nation, or they would not have added the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Arguments about the role of religion in public school are still with us and surface from time to time, as indicated by the case of former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Hall, who recently displayed the Ten Commandments in the Alabama State judicial building.[11] Clearly the question of whether secular humanism exists in any concrete sense and whether it constitutes a religion is a central issue in this debate. This controversy indicates that definitions of religion do have practical and important implications.

We have discussed the marks of a good definition, some of the biases that can creep into definitions, and examined two examples. It will be helpful to apply what we have learned to the claim that secular humanism is a religion.

Questions on Secular Humanism

Please answer the following questions. In all cases support your answer by stating your reasoning.

1. Is LaHaye's definition of secular humanism a good definition?
2. What understanding of religion does LaHaye's definition presuppose?
3. If we adopted Tillich's definition of religion, could secular humanism be classified as a religion?
4. If we adopted Spiro's definition of religion, could secular humanism be classified as a religion?
5. What do you think? Is secular humanism a religion?

2.4 A SIMPLE MAP OF THE FIELD

Before discussing methods of studying religion directly, let's look at a brief outline of the field of religious studies as it is presently practiced in many colleges and universities in the United States and elsewhere:

I. History of religion
   A. Developmental studies
   B. Comparative studies

II. Social scientific study of religion
    A. Anthropology of religion
    B. Sociology of religion Emile Durkheim
    C. Psychology of religion
III. Philosophy of religion
    A. Analytical
    B. Critical

This outline does not include areas that cut across these divisions, such as feminist studies, literary studies, and scriptural studies, but it will do as a starting point.

Developmental historical studies (**history of religions**) employ the theories and methods of history to study how a religion, religions, or part of a religion have developed through time. Religions that are living traditions have changed and are changing, because nothing that survives can do so without adapting to its changing environment. Those that have ceased to change are dead religions of the past, although parts may have survived in other religious forms. An example is the spring fertility rituals using painted eggs that have been incorporated into Christian Easter celebrations of the resurrection of Christ. Developmental historians are interested in how religions have changed and what factors are at work that cause change. They are also interested in continuities, because not everything changes completely. A basic assumption of the developmental approach is that religions are complex and dynamic historical processes exhibiting both change and continuity.

Comparative studies focus primarily on comparing different religious traditions. The concern is less with the changes that religions undergo and more with structures or types (although there is no reason why a comparative study of changes could not be done). The comparativist arrests time by taking snapshots of different religious phenomena and comparing them. The comparativist may select one of the many dimensions of religion, such as ritual, and do a comparative study of certain types of ritual activities in, say, Islam and Judaism. One basic assumption of comparative studies is that there are certain analytical categories (belief, ritual, morality, and so on) that are useful for cross-cultural comparison. Ideally, the comparativist should balance the description of similarities and differences, but often, differences are submerged or overlooked in the rush to find similarities.

Social scientists use the current methods and theories of their fields to understand and explain religion within a larger setting. A basic assumption for social scientists is that insofar as religion is a human activity, it can be explained by cultural, social, or psychological factors, just as any human phenomenon can be explained by such factors. The anthropologist (**anthropology of religion**) is particularly concerned with religion in relation to culture. Although the concept of culture is vague and can have a variety of meanings,

here, it refers to the sum total of the symbols humans produce in order to convey information, make sense of experience, and order relations within human groups. Cultures need symbol systems to convey information. Language, art, religion, philosophy, science, technology, manners, and morality are examples of significant cultural symbol systems that convey information and create the meaning necessary for human groups to cope successfully with their environments.

Anthropologists interested in the study of religion pay particular attention to the nature and function of religious symbol systems. One of the most influential definitions of religion derives from the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, religion is "(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[12]

Geertz's definition indicates one way to approach the study of religion. Following his lead, the student of religion would seek to uncover some of the ways in which religion functions to motivate humans and order social life by means of symbols. For example, some religions have symbol systems that deal with life after death in terms of heaven and hell. Symbols of heaven and hell can powerfully affect human behavior. In some cases they can motivate extreme behavior, such as suicide bombings, inquisitions, and holy wars. These kinds of symbol systems create a this-worldly/otherworldly framework for thinking about life. Life in this world is preliminary to an afterlife in another world. Symbols of the afterlife can be powerful enough to convince people that what they cannot see is real. Indeed, these symbol systems can convince people that they have genuine information about the future. People who live in a culture filled with symbols of the afterlife live in anticipation of a future yet to be. The best (or the worst) is yet to come.

For sociologists (**sociology of religion**), the operative category is society. As used here, society is a narrower category than culture. It encompasses the particular ways groups within cultures organize themselves. Sociologists are particularly interested in the social functions of religion. Many sociologists see religion as a kind of "social glue" that binds groups together. It helps to provide group identity and thereby differentiate one human group from another. Religion can also split groups apart and rearrange an old grouping into a new social order. The sociologist seeks, among other things, to discover how religions promote social solidarity and contribute to social change.

For example, a sociologist might be interested in studying how belonging to a religious group provides people with a sense of identity. Having an identity is fundamentally important to human existence. If asked who they are, people might include in their response, "I am a Muslim," or "I am a Hindu."

Establishing such identities not only tells people who they are, it also tells them who they are not: "I am Hindu, and they are not." Identities imply complex sets of beliefs, values, and behaviors. So they might think, "Hindus practice this ritual and Muslims practice that ritual, and since I am a Hindu I too must practice as Hindus do and not as Muslims do."

Psychologists (**psychology of religion**) are usually more individually oriented than sociologists and anthropologists. Rather than focusing on religion as a cultural symbol system or on its social functions, psychologists often focus on how religion expresses repressed feelings or universal psychic tendencies. Psychologists might ask how religion shapes character development. Or they may be concerned with the relationships among religious commitment, deviant behavior, mental illness, and moral development. There is little doubt that religious experiences play important roles in people's lives, and psychologists are particularly interested in the experiential aspect of religion. They seek to find out what kind of religious experiences occur and how to best understand such experiences.

I divide **philosophy of religion** into two categories: analytic and critical. This is somewhat artificial, however, because in practice they are often combined. Elsewhere I have defined philosophy of religion as "the rational attempt to formulate, understand, and answer fundamental questions about religious matters."[13] The philosophical quest for formulating, understanding, and answering fundamental questions demands both careful analysis of religious beliefs and actions and a critical response (negative or positive) whose goal is a deeper rational understanding of religious matters. Exactly what is rational and what are fundamental questions are subjects of intense debate. A basic assumption of this discipline is that if there is such a thing as religious truth, careful philosophical criticism and analysis should be able to uncover it. So philosophy of religion is typically concerned with arguments for God's existence, the reasonableness of notions about life after death, whether religious experiences provide evidence of some religious reality, whether the existence of evil in the world is incompatible with the existence of God, or other questions arising out of religious belief and practice. Historians and social scientists usually refrain from offering judgments about the truth or falsity of the religious beliefs and actions they study, but philosophers are often concerned with questions of truth. Philosophers want to know if religions are bearers of truth.

I have not listed theology as part of the field of religious studies, and some may find that odd. **Theology**, according to St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), is the study of the divine, and its goal is knowledge of God. For St. Thomas, a Roman Catholic Christian, God is at the apex of a triangle that includes humans and nature; hence theology is the queen of the academic sciences, while humanities (the study of humans) and natural science (the study of nature) assume subordinate positions. Historically, religious studies evolved

out of theology, and, while theology is no longer considered the queen of the sciences, both religious studies and theology find a place among the numerous academic pursuits found in modern universities.

If we think of religious studies as an activity of the outsider, then theology, as traditionally understood, is an insider activity. It is true that theologians interpret their faith traditions using critical tools, which are often the same critical tools used by the outsider. But theology is not just an act of critical interpretation, it is a confession of faith. Doing theology usually presupposes a commitment to religious truth, whereas religious studies do not. For example, some Buddhists affirm that the Buddhist experience of "enlightenment provides the ultimate criterion of interpretation."[14] Likewise many Christian theologians claim that theology must be rooted in faith. The widely accepted formula of "faith seeking understanding" often characterizes the Christian theological approach.

If religion has to do with a reality that transcends the world of ordinary experience, then theology can be characterized as an attempt to directly study transcendence; to give us, following St. Thomas, "knowledge of God." The focus of religious studies, however, is not on transcendence per se, but on believers and how they experience and interpret what they take to be transcendent. Theology, understood as the interpretive practice of the insider, is one more aspect of the subject matter with which religious studies concerns itself. Theology is the scholarly language *of* religion, and religious studies are the scholarly language *about* religion. Although some may see theology and religious studies as opposed (if not antagonistic) and others as complementary, one thing is clear: they are different, and the student of religion can learn much by reflecting on how they are different.

2.5 GOALS AND METHODS

The goals of religious studies—whether historical, social scientific, or philosophical—are very much like the general goals of all academic disciplines—namely, to describe, interpret, explain, and evaluate phenomena. We need to examine these goals in turn.

Description

There is no such thing as pure description because every description is already an interpretation; but for the moment I will artificially isolate it and characterize it as gathering and stating the facts of the case. Just as in a court of law a case cannot proceed without knowing the facts, so the study of religion cannot proceed without knowing the data. In the field of religious studies, there is an enormous amount of information in a variety of different languages and cultures, ranging from archeological artifacts, pictures, coins, statues, and the like, to sacred scriptures, commentaries on sacred scriptures, and many other

kinds of writings. The range is great, and I have not yet mentioned rituals, oral traditions, and extraordinary experiences of transformation and revelation.

Gathering this information requires mastering a variety of technical skills such as learning different languages. Presenting the information fairly and accurately is not easy. Mistakes can easily creep in, especially when dealing with gestures, customs, games, and rites from vastly different cultures.

In order to facilitate the collection and presentation of data, students of religion use classification schemes. These schemes can be very general, referring to religious traditions as a whole (for example, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), or they can be more specific, referring to aspects of different religious traditions (for example, beliefs, myths, symbols, scriptures, experiences, morality, rituals, and organization). Whatever classification scheme is used, scholars create it by reflecting on information at hand and then use it to gather and organize additional information. Generally this sort of **description** involves classifying x under a category according to some property (p) of x. Suppose x is the Islamic belief that asserts Allah is the one and only God (p). As students of religion, we might categorize such a belief as monotheistic because **monotheism** is a category that includes all beliefs that share the property of claiming there is only one God. We now know a fact about Islam that allows us to describe it as a monotheistic religion. This also allows us to compare this monotheistic belief with beliefs about the divine found among other religions.

Developing classification systems requires that we identify prototypes. A **prototype** is an ideal exemplar of the type or category in question. Other things are matched to this prototype. The closer the match, the more likely we are to describe something (bowing the head and folding the hands) as a member of the class in question (praying). If the match is not very close, we are unlikely to describe some action (slashing oneself with a knife in grief) as praying.

Typologies are schemes of classification. They organize data into different types. For example, after studying the data, we might conclude that there are two primary types of praying: supplication and thanksgiving. This typology can then be used to organize new data. The advantage of typologies rests primarily in their ability to organize vast amounts of data, but there are disadvantages as well. Typologies are often incomplete—prayers exist that do not neatly fit in one category or another—or they obscure other important features of the data. Why not create a typology of praying by classifying prayers as formal and informal, or as silent and spoken, or as communal and solitary? Lurking within every typology is a degree of arbitrariness. Sometimes typologies reveal more about the creator's biases than they do about the data.

How do we select prototypes, identify the relevant properties, and create useful typologies? We learn how to do it based on study, experience, reasoning, comparison, and intuition.

Interpretation

What does the described data mean? That is the central problem for **interpretation.** The first question is "mean to whom?" To the insider, meaning is part of the descriptive data. To the outsider, meaning reflects the best understanding an outside observer can arrive at given the data, the methods of interpretation, and the theories available.

Methods of interpretation are often called hermeneutical. **Hermeneutics** is the science of interpretation, although the word *science* is used here in a very broad sense. To interpret is to see *x* as a *sign* of *y*. We interpret when we assign a particular referent (the signified) to a sign (the signifier). Signs can be letters, words, pictures, sounds, musical notes, physical gestures—the list is almost endless because practically anything can be taken as a sign, from trees and cloud formations to flags and buildings. Hence hermeneutics is part of a more general study called **semiotics**—the study of signs.

Hermeneutical studies can focus on any aspect of religion (beliefs, rituals, experiences), but I will describe it briefly by focusing on the interpretation of written texts. The first rule of hermeneutics is that meaning is *context dependent,* that is, what a text means depends on a variety of contexts both immediate and remote. Just as words have different meanings in different contexts, so texts have different meanings in different contexts. If I said, "I am going to the bank," you would not know the exact meaning of the word *bank* until I went on to specify, "in order to fish." The context of fishing rather than the context of cashing a check lets you know what I mean—that is, what the sign *bank* signifies (edge of a body of water).

One way to uncover context is to discover the **Sitz im Leben** (situation in life) of a text. Where and when was it written? By whom and to whom was it written? What is its purpose or function? Knowing the situation in life reveals much about the meaning of a text (or any other sort of sign for that matter).

There are also certain formal features of a text that provide information about its meaning. What type of writing is it? Is it a letter, poem, narrative, scripture, or commentary? What is its surface structure, that is, its organization, style, and themes?

In addition to surface structure, there is also a "deep" structure that is more difficult to discern. Deep structures are the hidden rules governing what is said, much like the structure of language is determined by the hidden rules of grammar. In order to get at this hidden structure, scholars distinguish between the text (what the author writes) and the subtext (either explicit asides by the author about what he or she writes or indirect meanings such as irony). Scholars look at what is *included* in a text, but they must also be aware of what is *excluded.* Social rules about inclusion and exclusion determine, in part, what is said. For example, I have excluded certain words from my account of hermeneutics because I deem them inappropriate in textbook writing or I have judged them to be misleading.

Comparison is implicit in the activities of determining the type of text and in determining structure and function. The remote context of religious phenomena can be uncovered by comparing different examples and discerning the similarities and differences. A story of a saint in Christianity can be illuminated by comparison with a story of a saint in Buddhism, even if the stories are very different and unrelated culturally and historically.

Comparison involves selecting significant examples and then looking for similarities and differences among them. No attempt should be made to determine whether one example is "better" than another in the sense of truer or morally superior. (Avoid judgments such as the Christian saint is really a saint, and the Buddhist saint is a fraud.) One example might be judged more typical or less typical of the type under discussion (stories about saints), but even that judgment is tricky. As you can see, there is much room for prejudice and unconscious bias to enter the selection process. Why is one story rather than another selected as "typical"?

Developing a comparative perspective is essential to learning about others. Religion is one of the most enduring and vital traits of human societies. We learn much of value about being and becoming human from studying the similarities and differences among religions as fairly and sympathetically as possible.

Explanation

The student of religion seeks not only to collect and describe information and to interpret it by employing hermeneutical and comparative methods, but also to explain what is going on.

The word **explanation** can mean several different things. To some, it means an understanding gained by discovering the meaning of religious phenomena. In other words, interpretation is one type of explanation. To others, it means finding and describing the cause or causes of some religious phenomenon. This requires a direct and explicit appeal to some theory.

Description and interpretation are influenced by theory, but explanation is the most clearly theory-laden activity. This can be explained most easily by an example. In physics the event of a falling apple is explained by subsuming it (along with many other examples of falling things) under the theory of gravity. So a religious event like a sacrifice might be explained by subsuming it under a general theory about the causes of violence.

Historical and social scientific explanations, however, are not always causal in the sense of the occurrence of one set of events necessarily resulting in another set of events. Sometimes explanations are functional, such as Karl Marx's (1818–1883) explanation of religion functioning as an opiate. This explanation of religion is in terms of its effects (what it does), not its causes (what produced it). Other explanations are structural in nature. For example, Marx also explains religious behavior in terms of class differences between

rich and poor. Social structures like a class system are not events, and if causes must be events, then social structures cannot be causes.

An important question to ask when studying any human behavior is, who benefits (*cui bono*)? In whose interest is it that certain rites are performed in certain ways? Who benefits from the way power is distributed in a religious group? Do certain worldviews benefit one social class more than another? All beliefs are not equal; some benefit certain people more than others. Although much religious morality speaks of the virtue of being altruistic or unselfish (and this is something we should not ignore), much human behavior is selfish, even when people claim otherwise. When trying to explain why humans do the things they do, the answer to the *cui bono* question reveals much.

The student of religion will encounter different kinds of explanation. Some will be causal, some functional, and still others structural. All, however, will appeal to some theory about religion, and hence the study of theory is unavoidable.

Evaluation

For an explanation to make sense, the theory that gives rise to it must be correct. How can we find that out? Physical scientists can check their theories by controlled laboratory experiments, but in religious studies such checking procedures are seldom possible. What is possible is to check the fruitfulness of a theory by measuring it against many different examples to see if it makes sense of all or most of them. Does a detailed and careful study of ten examples of religious movements selected at random from the world's religions make more sense when viewed from Marx's theory rather than some other theory? For example, Marx's theory implies that religion is primarily a conservative force working against social change. But is that always the case? Haven't religious movements also fostered social change? Religious groups and leaders have been in the forefront of promoting social change. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement come immediately to mind. Is Marx's opiate theory adequate to explain that movement?

Evaluation has many different levels. We might evaluate the accuracy of someone else's description by checking it against our own reading of the original data. We might question the value of someone's interpretation by checking on how rigorously the hermeneutical method was employed. We can evaluate a theory by checking its explanatory power against other possible theories. In this sense of evaluation (what I call second-order evaluation), one scholar is evaluating the work of another against such criteria as logical consistency, strength of evidence and argument, compelling counterexamples, and alternative explanations.

What about evaluating religious claims themselves? Can we engage in first-order evaluation? Indeed, should we do first-order evaluation? Many scholars acknowledge that the methods of history, the social sciences, and philosophy are limited to natural explanations. There is, they assert, no human way to evaluate supernatural claims. Was Jesus truly the Son of God, or did he and others just think so? That he made that claim or did not make it, that others made it, and what it meant—these are things that are possible to check, provided enough information survives. But the theological claim that Jesus is the Son of God—how could we check that?

Some philosophers and theologians might think we can check it just like we check other metaphysical claims—that is, is it logically consistent with everything we know about other kinds of things? Given what we know about history, about the physical universe, about human behavior, about other religions, about the effects on people's lives of believing Jesus is God's Son, is it plausible that Jesus is truly the Son of God? You can imagine the arguments on both sides, and you can imagine arguments claiming that such questions fall outside the range of questions that can be asked (let alone answered) in the academic study of religion. We shall return to this issue in the last chapter.

Goals and Methods of Religious Studies

1. Description
   a. Prototype
   b. Typology
2. Interpretation
   a. Hermeneutics
   b. Comparison
3. Explanation
   a. Causal
   b. Functional
   c. Structural
4. Evaluation
   a. First-order
   b. Second-order

2.6 FIELDWORK[15]

The study of religion requires more than the examination of texts. Fieldwork is essential. There is no substitute for talking to people who practice their religion and observing what they do. I encourage you to do this, but as a student of religions you should engage others in a way that provides the best information for describing, interpreting, explaining, and evaluating as objectively as possible what others believe and do.

Social scientists have developed fieldwork techniques that aid in the gathering of data. These techniques are called participant observation. Participant observation involves six activities. They are preparation, observation, participation, interview, documentation, and presentation of results.

In preparing for fieldwork, one should read about the history, beliefs, and practices of the target religious group. This preparation will provide a framework for interpreting what is observed. When you actually visit a group, you should be courteous, friendly, and respectful. Your presence and manner are bound to influence the sort of data you gather so try to both minimize your impact and act in a way that elicits as much candid information as possible.

What follows is a sample of the sorts of data for which one might look. It is by no means exhaustive.

1. What is the mood and atmosphere like?
2. How are people dressed, what kinds of cars do they drive, and what do these (and other factors) indicate about the social and economic status of the people?
3. What seems to be the central focus (beliefs, morality, politics, experience, money, success, etc.) of the message?
4. What are the major beliefs, rituals, moral rules, social events, festivals, etc.?
5. How does the group relate to its local community, and what is its attitude toward society?

Interviewing members, both laity and clergy, can provide important data. Prepare questions ahead of time, but be flexible enough to follow the leads the answers you get might provide.

After collecting the data, you need to interpret and explain the results to others. The customary outline in the social sciences for the presentation, interpretation, and explanation of the results is as follows:

I. Introduction—Statement of research topic, literature review, hypothesis, definition of terms, predicted results, description of procedures for gathering data.
II. Body
   A. Description of data gathered including such things as the name of the group, location, conditions under which data was gathered, general background information, what happened, in what order, characteristics of participants (age, gender, occupations, race, numbers, etc.).
   B. Discussion and interpretation of findings.
III. Conclusions—summary of hypothesis, predicted and observed results, implications of results in relationship to hypothesis (confirm, disconfirm, uncertain), limitations of research, and implications for future research.

2.7 A CONTROVERSY

Why do humans behave the way they do when it comes to matters of religion? Why do some of them believe that invisible forces from fairies to ghosts to spirits to gods control their lives and events in the world? Why do others think that belief in unseen powers amounts to little more than superstition? Questions like these brew controversy.

Part of that controversial brew centers on an issue called **reductionism.** Can the explanation of religious behavior be reduced to cultural, biological, social, historical, economic, and psychological (the list is nearly endless) factors? According to those scholars who practice the **phenomenology of religion,** the answer is no. Religion cannot be reduced to non-religious factors. At the core of religion is the apprehension of the sacred. Religions should be, indeed must be, understood as appearances (*phenomena*) of the sacred in different ways, times, and places. The world religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the rest) amount to different manifestations of the sacred.

However, according to others, religious belief and behavior is not the manifestation of an irreducible quality called the sacred. It is no more mysterious than any other human activity. We can seek and find its causes in historical, social, and biological factors.

Who are right, the phenomenologists who reject reductionism or the other scholars who think that religion can be explained without recourse to ideas like the sacred? You can decide for yourselves. Hopefully this book will help you make up your minds or, at the very least, understand how difficult it is to decide whether religion is the manifestation of something irreducibly religious or not so very different from other human attempts to understand themselves and the world in which they live.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is the difference between a unidimensional and a multidimensional definition of religion important?
2. What is the difference between a functional and a substantive definition of religion? Give an example of each.
3. What is the difference between an essential and a cluster definition of religion? Give an example of each.
4. Write a one-sentence definition of religion and then analyze it in terms of biases. Which biases, if any, does it reveal?
5. Do you prefer Tillich's or Spiro's definition of religion? Provide reasons to support your preference.
6. How does the philosophy of religion differ from the history of religion?
7. What is a typology, and why is it important to the study of religion?