UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies

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RELIGION

Language, Law, and Legacies

IN WHICH WE EXPLORE:

Definitions of the term "religion," and critical problems with the category religion

The world religions paradigm (WRP) and its colonial, Western, and Christian legacy

Issues in the legal, political, and social deployment of "religion"

Case studies exploring Falun Gong and legal-political issues, and the distinction of culture and religion in Christian-Confucian encounters

INTRODUCTION: DO WE KNOW WHAT RELIGIONS ARE?

"Religion" may seem like a straightforward term. We can name religions (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.), or give terms that define it (transcendence, community, supernatural beings, scriptures, etc.). Further, we tend to know what it is not. For instance, it is contrasted with "secular," and so it is distinguished from economics, philosophy, politics, and so on. However, when we start to contemplate these categories and definitions, we soon find ourselves facing a range of problems, including, but not limited to, the following:

- What about traditions like Confucianism, which look and act quite a lot like religion in many situations, but are said to be a "philosophy" or a "secular humanist tradition"?

- Some Buddhists will insist that there are no supernatural beings in their tradition—the Buddha was simply a human who came to an insight attainable by anyone.
- Religious traditions inform the way people vote, spend their money, and have been inspirational for philosophers.

Actually, the question is so problematic that some scholars suggest we should abandon the category "religion." They argue that a modern, Western, Christian (specifically European Protestant) and Enlightenment (see box 16.1) paradigm has, via a history of colonialism (see chapter 7), become a global norm. Therefore, complex aspects of culture have been distorted and misrepresented. In this chapter, we will explore criticisms of the concept "religion," look at potential defenses, and then note how and why the concept is used in this book. We will conclude with two case studies. By the end of this chapter, we will see that definitions of religion are inherently political, and often hide more than they reveal.

HISTORICIZING RELIGION

We begin by looking at some of the deep problems with the term and concept "religion" through six main themes.

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

In 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) argued that the concept of religion as we know it is a modern English (or, more broadly, Western) notion which does not occur in other languages or historical contexts.[1] The origins of the term are very different from current conceptions (see box 1.1). Typically, "religion(s)" today signifies a range of traditions found throughout the world which share many similar features. This, it has been argued, distorts our view of the world and history.

One way "religion" distorts is when we translate words into English. The Indian term "*dharma*" is often translated as "religion." However, the most common usage is closer to "duty." Traditionally, in India, people were born into a specific caste (see box 4.6) which defined their occupation, so you might come from a family of butchers, weavers, warriors, or priests. To fulfil your *dharma* is to live out your caste station. Moreover, British colonial officials in India found what they saw as the distinct questions of religion and caste conflated and struggled to understand the connections. Another usage of the term *dharma* is "tradition," or "teaching lineage." One could follow Shankaradharma (Shankara's tradition) or Ramanujadharma (Ramanuja's tradition), but the meaning still differs from the English "religion." Both traditions are classed as Hindu today. This list does not exhaust *Dharma*'s numerous meanings.[2] Rendering it as "religion" is problematic.

BOX 1.1 THE ETYMOLOGY OF RELIGION

Religion stems from the Latin *religio*, for which we have two different etymologies. The most commonly known is that of Lactantius (ca. 250–325 CE), who claimed it came from *religere* meaning "to yoke" or "to bind." For Lactantius, it was the bond between the human and (the Christian) God. However, Lactantius's etymology tried to replace an older one from Cicero (106–43 BCE). For Cicero, *religio* came from *relegere,* meaning to "retrace" or "reread." It was about repeating or continuing the rites of your ancestors. Religion was therefore about following the customs of your community, family, and particular location. In Cicero's understanding, *religio* was:

- tolerant—each has their own (the only limit is non-interference with civic duties);
- pluralistic—there can never be only one religio (variation is inevitable);
- ritualistic—it concerns practices and homage; and
- human—it involves rituals developed by your ancestors.

In Lactantius's conception, by contrast, *religio* was:

- intolerant—there is one true religion, and others must therefore be false;
- exclusive—truth is singular;
- faith-centric—belief rather than ritual is key; and
- divine—it is not a human product.

We cannot draw a straight line from Lactantius to all forms of Christianity (some are pluralistic and tolerant or very focused on ritual). Nevertheless, Lactantius's definition laid important foundations that still shape Western thinking. Moreover, the etymology is political, not descriptive. Using anachronistic language, Cicero's *religio* meant Christians were "atheists": they lacked a tradition; they did not accept the pluralism of *religio;* and their tradition disrupted civic duties, that is, they would not worship the emperor. Lactantius's definition was therefore not a simple description, but an agenda to make Christianity not just acceptable as *religio,* but to be *religio*.[1]

1 See S.N. Balagangadhara, *"The Heathen in His Blindness": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

Likewise, the Arabic *"deen"* is often translated as "religion," but looking at how this is translated in Quran 5.3 will show why this is problematic:[3]

> This day I have perfected your *religion* [*deen*] for you, completed My favour to you. I have chosen *Islam* [*islam*] to be your *faith* [*deen*].[4]

This standard modern translation suggests that there is a specific religious tradition called "Islam," translating *deen* as "religion" and "faith" (we often assume religions need faith),

BOX 1.2 ***ZONGJIAO* AND *MIXIN*: RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION IN CHINA**

Chinese has no native term for "religion." The closest traditional term is *jiao*, which means something like "teachings," "tradition," or "lineage." Hence, Buddhism was Buddha teachings (*fojiao*), Daoism was "Way" teachings (*daojiao*), and Confucianism was scholar-tradition (*rujiao*). *Jiao* does not simply map onto religion. Needing a term to match "religion," the Japanese coined a new word which was adopted into Chinese: *zongjiao*. The first character signifies "ancestral [rite]," and the second is "tradition." One translation could be "ritual traditions of our forebears." But, generally, it connotes "a superstructure which consists of superstition, dogmas, rituals, and institutions."[1] Further, *zongjiao* is distinguished from *mixin*, another modern coinage to match "superstition." In mainland China, the major (recognized) "religions" (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholic Christianity—the latter two are separate "religions" in China) and their practices are *zongjiao*, while folk and traditional "religions" and their practices are *mixin* (see boxes 7.8 and 9.4).

1 Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40–41.

and treating "Islam" as a noun. However, in Arabic, *deen* signifies "custom" or "judgment." Therefore, following Arabic usage, we can adjust the translation as follows:

> This day I have perfected your *customs* [*deen*] for you, completed My favour to you. I have chosen *submission* [*islam*] to be your *behaviour* [*deen*].[5]

This rendering looks both at what *deen* and *islam* mean in Arabic, translating the latter literally as "submission" (see box 13.2). Hence rather than naming a particular religious tradition, Islam, it gives a traditional Arabic and Islamic understanding of "*islam*" as submission (to the will of God). The emphasis is on the practices and behavior rather than adhering to a specific named religion and its tenets of faith.

When we find near equivalents to "religion," like the Chinese *zongjiao*, we find a modern term created to provide an equivalent to Western usage (see box 1.2 and case study 1A).

THE NAMING AND CLASSIFICATION OF TRADITIONS

The names by which we know most religious traditions have been imposed by Western scholars and classifiers. The consequences of this vary. For instance, the English term "Confucianism" replaces the Chinese "*rujiao*," or "the tradition of the scholars." Confucians never saw Confucius as the founder of their tradition; his significance is in editing

and codifying a more ancient textual tradition (the *ru*/scholar's tradition). Hence this name misrepresents Confucianism by implying he is the founder.[6] What we call "Buddhism" may variously have been termed "*buddhadharma*" in India or "*fojiao*" in China. Both, more or less literally, mean "Buddha tradition/teachings." It is therefore not as misleading as Confucianism, though the "-ism" stresses ideology more than practice or lineage transmission. Islam, W. C. Smith claimed, is the only tradition which we describe by its own self-designation. However, in English, it becomes a distinct tradition rather than those submitting to God's will (see box 13.2). The most widely discussed naming as alleged creation is Hinduism (see case study 7A). "Hindu" originally indicated the land beyond the Indus (River). In time, it came to refer to the people and culture of South Asia, then finally the "religion" of the region: Hinduism. Indeed, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and tribal traditions have been included under the label of Hinduism. Let us reflect on how significant this is: we do not see natural divisions between religions, such that it is obvious that something is one and not another. Playing with this, Syed Farid Alatas asks us to imagine that the advance of conquests by Islamic empires over eastern Europe around the sixteenth century had not been stopped but had continued to the Rhine with subsequent conversions, and if therefore Muslims had created their own terminology to group together the "religious" traditions of western Europe in a similar way as Westerners did in India:

> The term *nahr al-rayn* [those beyond the Rhine], from which Nahraynianism, denoting the Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox and Jewish sects of Western Eurasia, was in all likelihood employed by the Arabs to the Rhine river in northern Eurasia. . . . It was only after the arrival of the Safavid Iranians in the sixteenth century that the term Nahraynianism came to refer to those peoples of Western Eurasia, who did not convert to Shi'ism.
>
> We would be in error though to suggest, however, that there is no naturally occurring *religio* that can be designated by the term Nahrayianism. This religion consists of Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox and Jewish sects which all trace their origins to a Hellenized rendition of the faith of Abraham. They profess belief in an immanent and yet transcendent personal God, and believe in a common set of scriptures, variously known as Torah, Talmud and Bible.[7]

Here, Alatas skillfully shows that, for outsiders (see chapter 2), the borders of traditions can be variously imagined.

THE WORLD RELIGIONS PARADIGM

Lactantius's etymology (box 1.1.) did not lead directly to our modern usage. Various twists in the story bring us to that. First, through the medieval period, *religio* denoted what we would today call "piety." With the Reformation, for the first time, *religio* could be pluralized: Catholic piety and Protestant piety (two traditions); existing diversity was often

subsumed under the heading of "heresy" and so seen as intra-Christian diversity (see chapter 13). This period coincided with the beginnings of European colonialism, when, for the first time, Christian Europe came face to face with the reality of other religious traditions. In Asia and elsewhere, European Christians had to deal with people who believed very differently and could not be set into the narratives which existed.[8] Thus, from about the seventeenth century (various arguments are made for the first usage), we see the term "religion" being applied not simply to two forms of Christianity, but to a range of different traditions around the world.

The Western world was also changing. This period saw a growing split between political power and church institutions, termed "secularization" (see chapter 16). Therefore, in (northwestern) Europe and North America, a sense developed that religion was separate from politics, economics, philosophy, and other spheres; it concerned the private realm—the beliefs and personal convictions of individuals.

Thus a range of factors and impulses gave rise to what, by the nineteenth century, can be spoken of as the "world religions paradigm" (WRP), which dominates the way we think about religion today.[9] Some key points of the WRP can be noted:

- There are a range of different religions which are essentially subspecies of a common genus.
- They share facets in common, typically scriptures, founders, beliefs, rituals, institutional organizations, and a priesthood.
- They concern personal belief and the private sphere, and do not (properly) concern politics, economics, and so forth.

There are many problems with these assumptions. For instance, Islam's religious elite (*ulama*) are legal scholars more than "priests," while "scripture" is not central to all religions (see box 1.3). Nevertheless, the WRP is powerfully influential: it is normally what is taught in schools and universities;[10] it determines how politicians, media commentators, community leaders, and religious leaders speak of "religion." It is simply how most of us are conditioned to think about the concept as a "natural" part of the world (see chapter 5).

THE SUI GENERIS AND EMPTY SIGNIFIER ISSUES

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) both believed there was a distinctive religious experience or sphere (see box 8.5). This, they held, was separate from any other aspect of human culture or experience and so unique, or sui generis (see box 1.4). Otto wrote a book called *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige* in the original German), which set out to describe the nature of religious experience.[11] Eliade sought to identify common patterns of religious experience and narrative across cultures, and spoke of humanity as *homo religiosus* ("the religious human"), meaning that religious sentiment is innate.[12] For both, there was a clearly identifiable arena of religion (including experience and symbols) which could be isolated and studied apart from other spheres of human

BOX 1.3 **DO ALL RELIGIONS HAVE SCRIPTURE?**

Saying that all religions have "scripture" is common, but it is a problem (see chapter 11):

- Scripture typically denotes texts considered to be divine revelation. But Confucians claim their texts are human products, while "revelation" is understood very differently between traditions (see box 11.4).
- We often assume, based on a Protestant dynamic, that scriptures define the norms of a religion or are the foundational source. But early Buddhists believed that real knowledge had to be passed person to person. Written texts were considered inadequate or secondary. However, around the second century BCE, a major famine in Sri Lanka made many fear that the oral record would be lost because so many monks were dying. The texts, originally a temporary measure, became central only later.
- We assume that all religions have texts. But Australian Aborigines and others do not, yet are among those we typically define as having a "religion."

BOX 1.4 **WHAT IS A SUI GENERIS CATEGORY?**

"Sui generis" derives from the Latin term meaning "of its own kind." It refers to something of a distinct type, not reliant on anything else. To speak of religion, or religious experience, as sui generis suggests it is distinct from other areas of life or other experiences. However, it is hard to see how those traditions we call religious are distinct from the arenas of politics, culture more broadly, philosophy, and many other areas. Even religious experiences are not clearly distinct (see box 8.5).

culture. However, critics have noted that, far from being clear and distinct, we actually find we cannot clearly locate religion as a phenomenon. There is an unclear border between what is and what is not religion.

If we say religion needs a god (or gods), we exclude some forms of Buddhism, as well as traditions which see the divine as some transcendent impersonal reality. When we talk of a supernatural or transcendent category, it is unclear what this may mean: if we describe it as something outside the general physical world which cannot be seen, touched, or experienced normally, then Marxist claims about the force of history as leading us toward the inevitable victory of the proletariat may fit as a nonphenomenal claim. Again, capitalism informs us that we must let the economy be run by "market forces," which are an unseen, untouchable force (see box 8.3). Whether we regard Marxism or capitalism as religions, they arguably have religious elements (though we are yet to define what "religious" is). It is hard to define religion in a way that distinguishes it

from other worldviews, unless we have sharply prescriptive borders—which cause their own problems, as just noted with Buddhism.[13] Maybe we should not try?

Such problems lead to the argument that "religion" is variously filled with so many meanings that it is in effect completely meaningless. It has been termed an "empty signifier" (see box 9.11),[14] used here to imply a word which means almost whatever the user wants, with McCutcheon even asking, "What might not also be called religion if soccer is?"[15] Is Buddhism a religion? You can answer yes or no. Is Marxism a religion? You can answer yes or no. Even if we ask if Christianity is a religion, people can answer yes or no: some Christians claim that Christianity is "revelation" or a "relationship." Does any definition of religion do more than tell us about the cultural expectations or agenda of the person using the word? "Religion" is a "shifting signifier" (see box 9.11), a term that is part of wider networks of meaning, but certain critics of religion arguably neglect that this is true of almost all terms, and fail to see the problems when this one term is singled out; this is discussed further below.

THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

If you lived in fourteenth-century England, you would not see the distinction we make today between "religion" and the "secular." Monarchs ruled by a God-given right combining religious and political legitimacy. In imperial China, the emperor was the Son of Heaven, ruling under the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*). In almost every traditional society, those things we term religion and politics have been coterminous. Only around the eighteenth century, in northwestern Europe and North America, did the conception arise that we could separate these two. This brief survey is just a rough guide to issues we explore elsewhere (see chapter 16). However, we can note some key points:

- Applied historically, speaking of two "natural" realms of the religious and secular is anachronistic, and separates the thought world of the people examined. It provides a problem when we look at many contemporary contexts, too.
- Many conceptual terms which we use to classify the contemporary world gained their current meanings over the last few centuries.[16] As such, words like "politics," "economics," "religion," and "secular" only make sense because we have divided the world into arbitrary, or culturally specific, boxes.
- To some extent, calling one area of life "religious" only makes sense because we call another area "secular" (see chapter 16), but these distinctions are always social and contingent rather than "natural" (see chapter 5).

THE POLITICS OF THE WORD

"Religion" has been employed politically in many ways. Today, the status of being a religion often grants a tradition/community various benefits such as tax breaks, charitable status,

BOX 1.5 **WHAT IS A CULT, OR *XIEJIAO*?**

Max Weber (1864–1920) described a cult as a religion which was newly founded and seeking its place in society. However, this is not an adequate definition, leading to a joke among historians of religion: "What is the difference between a cult and a religion?" Answer: "About 100 years." While "cult" is used among scholars of religion to refer to specific practices of devotion within a religion—for instance in Christianity there is the cult of the Virgin Mary, and Mahayana Buddhists have the cult of Guanyin (see box 2.9)—its popular usage is pejorative. In the media it refers to a religion that people do not approve of, often newly formed ones, or what scholars might call "new religious movements." In this sense, the Chinese government translates an indigenous term, *xiejiao,* as "evil cult," especially to refer to traditions such as Falun Gong (see case study 1A). The term is also variously translated as "cult," "evil religion," or "heterodox tradition."

Xiejiao goes back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) to identify "unacceptable traditions." The Chinese characters are *xie,* meaning "false," "erroneous," "unorthodox"; and *jiao,* meaning "tradition/teaching." Decisions as to what is xiejiao, that is, "heterodoxy/heresy," are not normally theological, and the classification has been the government's prerogative. The main criterion is a group that threatens public order. Historically, one primary use was for White Lotus Societies, anti–Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) revolutionaries. It was the revolutionary character of such movements that marked them as xiejiao. However, the decision lay with the Ministry of Rites and nearly always included discussion of erroneous beliefs and practices. The White Lotus Societies tended to be apocalyptic or messianic movements, that is, they spoke of the end of the world and/or proclaimed a coming savior figure. We are hard-pressed to find a xiejiao which is not also "religious." Notably, Christianity was declared a xiejiao in the eighteenth century; see case study 1B.

protection under the law, and so on. Contrarily, denying the category religion can stigmatize or delegitimize a tradition, as do such terms as "superstition," "magic" (see boxes 7.8, 9.4, and 12.2), and "cult" (see box 1.5). To most people, these may seem distinct from religion; however, the dividing lines are somewhat arbitrary (see case studies 1A and 7B).

"Religion" is so loaded politically that some scholars suggest we should only study how it is used, but never use it, because scholars cannot control how it is used to advantage or disadvantage certain groups and so should not be so presumptuous as to say what it "really means"; further, it is argued, the word carries rewards or punishments in society so it is not responsible for scholars to use it.[17] Certainly, religion's definition is not simply academic, but (like many other terms) is debated by politicians, lawyers, religious groups, and others. Indeed, the legal questions are often primary (see case study 1A). Human rights declarations and laws enshrine freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right (see chapter 16). Often courts arbitrate what is classified

as a religion. Considerations include whether the group/tradition calls itself a "religion (legally speaking, "subjective criteria") and whether it has such things as doctrines, rituals, or scripture (legally speaking, "objective criteria"). The latter often maps onto the WRP, though increasingly courts are taking notice of scholarly arguments about the flaws of this approach.

CAN WE SPEAK OF RELIGION TODAY?

HARD AND SOFT DECONSTRUCTION

W. C. Smith suggested we abandon the term "religion," arguing we should use "faith" for the internal aspects and "cumulative tradition" for the external factors.[18] But Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) argued: "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization."[19] In other words, not just the term but the very concept is a problem. This may result in a "hard deconstructivist" stance:[20] the manifold problems with religion are held to prove it is biased, distorted, and not analytically useful.[21] However, we could argue for a "soft deconstructivist" stance: this accepts the historicizing project (all words have a history), but sees problems with the wholesale rejection of the term. This may not involve rebuttals of the points above, but may add a deeper scholarly analysis. Moreover, while there are costs to using "religion," there are also benefits, which will be shown below, but in brief: it helps us speak about a historically and cross-culturally recognized, and recurring, social reality and aspect of human culture that critics try and fill with often more problematic terms, especially when looking at contemporary society, because we find a legal, social, and political entity. So, we can contest how it is constructed, but cannot deny its social reality (see box 1.9). (The terms "hard" and "soft" "deconstructivist" stances are used here for convenience; it is not how those in the disputes typically self-identify.)

THE HISTORICAL DATA FOR RELIGION

Part of the hard deconstructivist argument is that only modern Western scholars have bracketed together those traditions we today call religions. Certainly, at no other time in history could we have classified quite the same group of traditions together in the way we do. However, those things we today call religions have been relating to each other in ways that suggest they recognized some similarities:

- Buddhist monks and Catholic priests in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century Thailand recognized each other as inhabiting similar territory (as religious specialists).[22]
- When Muslims traveled eastward across Asia, they debated whether Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists should be included in the category of

"People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), which would put them in the same group as Christians and Jews (see box 13.2).
- Buddhists arriving in China from India (via Central Asia) had the most heated contestations with Daoists, and related debates with Confucians.

Historically, those traditions which today are grouped together as religions have, for centuries, been in contestation and debate due to recognition of similarities. Rhetorically we can ask:

- Why did Christian missionaries in Thailand not relate to fishermen as their closest rivals?
- Why did Muslims arriving in India not classify hairdressers as People of the Book?
- Why did Buddhists going to China not set up in opposition to the postal service?

Grouping some things as religious traditions is not simply a bizarre facet of the modern scholarly imagination; it is not entirely arbitrary. Of course, this does not show it is a sui generis category. Nevertheless, we can meaningfully say that throughout history those things we tend to think of as religions have engaged in ways which suggest recognition of similarity, even if this was sometimes apologetically to deny that others are truly religions.

ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS

Walter Gallie (1912–1998) noticed that some words cannot be adequately defined: there may be disagreements about what fits into a category; particular historical trajectories mean a word has a certain employment which does not fit other contexts; or we simply cannot agree on a definition. Gallie noted this applied to "art," "social justice," "democracy," and "Christianity." Many of these terms are deeply political, with society rewarding some and neglecting others; for instance, who defines what is "high" art and so displayed in certain galleries? Are the works of indigenous tribes "art" in the same way that Italian Renaissance paintings are considered to be art?

Gallie developed the notion of "essentially contested concepts" to refer to terms for which we cannot find universally agreed meanings. It can be argued that "religion" is an essentially contested concept.[23] Importantly, Gallie's point is that we do not abandon words simply because we cannot agree how to use them or what they mean. This is the nature of language. Critics of religion often seem to assume that it is a uniquely bad word, but it is arguably no worse than, for example, democracy. Athenian democracy is often claimed as a foundation of our modern systems, but neither women nor slaves could vote. Today, in many countries, powerful media moguls and online news outlets, alongside lobbyists from special interest groups and industry, can sway voters and elected politicians and so subvert elections. What counts as a democracy?

BOX 1.6 **RELIGION AND CULTURE**

The distinction between "religion" and "culture" is a commonplace. It normally distinguishes between "religion" as the supposed core elements of a tradition, with "culture" as localized, or nonessential, customs or beliefs. It may distinguish between terms seen within a social order as signifying something "religious" ("worship"), and those which are "non-religious" ("veneration") (see case study 1B). However, it is not an academic distinction. Every religious tradition involves interpretation, and what at any place or time may be considered the (changeable) "cultural" aspects, may elsewhere be seen as "religious" (unchangeable); varying religious authorities debate what falls into each category.

Notably, some scholars suggest that because "religion" is an empty signifier it should be replaced by "culture," arguing "religion" is only an arbitrarily defined aspect of culture.[1] However, our modern English usage of "culture," which developed in the nineteenth century, is also embedded in the modern Western social order. It can be critiqued in ways similar to religion, as scholars in cultural studies have long noted.[2] While some scholars today define "culture" as those aspects of human life which are not biologically determined, this is not analytic. For one thing, it encapsulates almost every conceivable activity that we (and many primates and other animals) engage in, and hence does not help us understand things better. For another, the distinction between what is and is not biologically given is contested and unstable, so while language would be seen as part of "culture" in these terms, it is also clear that humans have an inbuilt propensity to learn languages, thus problematizing this binary.

1 McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*.

2 See John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, and Michael Hecht, "A Moving Target: The Illusive Definition of Culture," in *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines,* ed. John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, Michael Hecht, and Sheryl Lindsley (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006); and Chris Barker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2004).

Particular terms/spheres where "religion" overlaps or intersects include philosophy, literature, art, politics, culture, and economics—themselves also essentially contested concepts. Sometimes particular work is done by making such distinctions, notably between "religion" and "culture" (see box 1.6). Gallie made an insightful point: essentially contested terms must be meaningful; that is, we are better off with the term than without it. Does this apply to religion?

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

W. C. Smith was right that other languages do not (traditionally) have words that match the modern English "religion." However, we are mistaken if we assume that most words have a one-to-one correspondence. Even with something as basic as color, this is not the

BOX 1.7 **WORLD PAIN AND LANGUAGE**

The German *schmerz* is often taken as a synonym for the English word "pain" (though both languages have quite a few words which describe hurt, anguish, etc.). But it can take on meanings pain does not have: *Weltschmerz* ("world" + "pain") is a sense of sorrow at the pains of the world, and *altschmerz* ("old" + "pain") is a type of boredom, weariness, or frustration at being faced with the same old problems. In English, we would see sorrow, generally, as different from pain, and certainly boredom, weariness, and frustration would not often be counted as pain.

case. Some languages have a variety of words signifying different colors for what in English we would see as different shades of green (see introduction); indeed, it seems that partly because of this people from those cultures can spot and recognize differences that native English speakers cannot: language does make us see the world differently.[24] That the English "religion" does not map exactly onto a single word in other languages is therefore not actually surprising or significant.

We discussed above how *dharma, deen,* and *zongjiao* are often translated into English as "religion," and noted the confusion this can cause. However, this does not mean that they are entirely unrelated. Words such as "pain," "suffering," "anguish," or "hurt" do not necessarily match directly onto words in another language, but this does not mean that only English speakers know what pain is (see box 1.7).

The lack of exact terms does not mean that translation can never occur: how else could Chinese people read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* or English speakers read Sun Zi's *Art of War*? Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) have theorized what they term the problem or "agony" of translation; while difficult, and generally never capable of one-to-one transference, translation does and can happen in both theory and practice (see introduction).[25] We must always beware of what is lost or hidden, though, when we translate. Critics of religion discuss its problems as somehow uniquely bad, or the only word we have trouble translating. Many words, certainly concepts, such as philosophy, politics, or slavery (see box 1.8), have no equivalents in some languages.

Of course, we are not simply translating words. Cultural systems are embedded into networks of linguistic meanings. We noted a problem with assuming *dharma* meant religion. Likewise, when we call Shinto a religion, what do we fail to see in that tradition if we assume that our notion of religion encapsulates what it means and what it entails in a Japanese context?[26]

Religion has a specific history and ideology that has arisen in a Western (mainly Protestant) Christian context in the transition into what is generally known as secular modernity. Most terminology that we use conceptually, when speaking English, has the same heritage. It is not a neutral description of the way the world is. Michel Foucault

BOX 1.8 **WERE THERE SLAVES IN ANCIENT GREECE?**

Ancient Greek had no word that directly relates to the modern English "slave," nor did it have a concept that equates to "slavery." Does this mean there were no slaves? Those people we speak of as slaves were treated in other linguistic ways.[1] We could say that

- they had no word for it and so it did not exist;
- it is a meaningless concept applied to their world; or
- we have named a conception, which they spoke of differently, but still has a useful application in that context.

To say a word can only be used in the context it arose, or only means what it originally meant when it was created, is what philosophers term the "etymological fallacy" (see box 11.2).

1 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotso (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

(1926–1984) is generally credited with the insight that all language and classification is political: we shape that which is other than us into boxes which we have made. This insight means we must be aware of the problems of all our language and classifications. If we use the terminology and theory, we must do so with caution and an awareness of its limitations.

THE CATEGORY OF THE RELIGIOUS

When we quoted J. Z. Smith, above, we missed his first line: "There is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious."[27] He argues we can speak about things which are "religious" but we have problems when we speak about "religions," because we assume they fit the WRP. Likewise, Timothy Fitzgerald suggested that we should get rid of "religion" and instead use "sacred" to speak about the same spheres of culture.[28] We see here a fissure in the hard deconstructivist argument: how to speak of those areas where we historically see "religions." One cannot argue that "religion" should be abandoned as a term, but then agree that temples and post offices are clearly different in ways that invoke "religious" language to clarify this. It is a word that helps us, as Jeppe Sinding Jensen says: "It [religion] is a handy term, one that helps getting a grip on complex ideas, one could call it an 'epistemic placeholder.'"[29] To introduce an idea I develop elsewhere, we can distinguish between analytic categories and descriptive categories.[30] While religion may not be a higher-order analytic category (something which we can classify as a discrete class in its own right), this does not mean it is not a definitional category (a

subcategory of an analytical category which helps us clarify between specifically delineated concepts). Indeed, descriptive categories remain analytically useful by helping us see things more clearly. In relation to religion, the concept of the sacred (in its sociological usage; see chapter 18, especially box 18.7, as concepts to which we apply absolute value) is an analytical category, with such things (when invested with absolute value) as religion, nationalism, Marxism, human rights, and so on, being definitional categories within its remit. Though one could also suggest that if culture were taken as an analytic category (notwithstanding the issues noted in box 1.6 of its overly broad usage), then religion could be a definitional category that assists us in narrowing that down for analytic purposes.

Indeed, many scholars who criticize the WRP do not abandon religion. Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, Richard King, and others have spoken powerfully about the problem of "religion" but suggest we can use it strategically, or at least do not advocate its total abandonment. Moreover, other scholars offer powerful arguments about how we can meaningfully employ religion:

- Martin Riesebrodt (1948–2014) argues that the theme of salvation provides an analytically powerful tool to conceptualize religion.[31]
- Gavin Flood has undertaken very sophisticated comparative studies of patterns across religions (see chapter 11).[32]
- The cognitive science of religion strongly indicates that, at a species level, commonalities which relate to "religion" exist (see chapter 8).

EPISTEMOLOGY: OR, HOW DO WE KNOW ANYTHING?

Our final issue concerns the way we know things (epistemology). This may seem obscure, but Kevin Schilbrack has shown that the hard deconstructivist stance often relies on a particular form of "non-realism" (see box 5.8).[33] Roughly, this version of non-realism contends that all meaning is linguistic and contingent; if everything is only linguistic, "religion" cannot relate directly to any reality outside of discourse. Schilbrack, however, argues that this hard deconstructivist stance misconstrues the arguments.[34] This debate is tackled elsewhere in this book (see, primarily, introduction, box 5.8, and chapters 2, 5, 8, and 9), but some points can be noted briefly. This text employs a critical hermeneutical phenomenology holding that while religion is a social construction, it is not entirely arbitrary because it is part of wider cultural forms related to human embodiment and materiality. Further, "religion" *exists* in human social and cultural worlds as a social reality (see box 1.9).

SPEAKING OF RELIGION?

Having looked at the arguments, we need to decide whether we can still employ the term "religion." While readers must decide for themselves, we note below six reasons why, and how, the term "religion" is employed throughout this book:

BOX 1.9 **RELIGION AS A SOCIAL REALITY**

"Social reality" refers to systems or concepts which, while created by humans (and therefore artificial constructions), have a real effect upon the world and how we live. We cannot simply pretend they do not exist, or that they are simply linguistic realities, because they have actual material consequences for our behavior, the way we think, and how we relate to other people. The traditions we term religions, and which today (and, as argued above, historically) relate together as structurally equivalent realms, have real social consequences: people build temples to express their "devotion"; women do not attend temples when they menstruate, believing in "pollution"; followers of religions go to countries rife with the Ebola virus because their "faith" gives them a duty; people have a "calling" to dedicate their lives to poverty, celibacy, and "prayer." Religion is a social reality, not simply a free-floating linguistic idea.[1]

1 See Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology," and John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

1. There are traditions around the world which have, historically and in the contemporary context, related as somewhat similar domains. These we will term "religions," but we do not apply a WRP approach assuming commonality of function, organization, or modes of behavior. Religion is simply a useful classifier and an essentially contested concept.
2. There seems to be a realm of "culture" we can usefully speak of as "religious." This broadly indicates realms of thought, life, and interaction that deal with what may be broadly termed "transcendence" (see box 1.10).
3. What we call religion is not a separate sphere from philosophy, politics, economics, art, or even the secular. These realms, which we can usefully distinguish for strategic purposes (as definitional categories), overlap and are not static.
4. We must stay alert to what is hidden when we employ the term "religion." It will conjure certain things to our mind, not other things.
5. We must never forget that "religion" is not a neutral descriptor. No word is. The very fact that our discussion of the term is in English shapes the arguments, how we frame those arguments, and even how we think (see chapters 2 and 7, and box 18.1).
6. As our concern is contemporary "religion" in society, many traditions claim and relate to this label today, while it is also a political and legal reality. Traditions are, or have become, "religions" in multiple ways.

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BOX 1.10 **TRANSCENDENCE/TRANSCENDENT**

"Transcendence" here refers to concepts/beings/spheres/posited realities which are seen as beyond the phenomenal/physical world. These transcendent referents may be diverse and do not clearly relate to any unifying concept. Traditions which relate to transcendence are commonly termed "religions." However, they are not clearly demarcated from certain supposedly "secular" systems. For instance, Marxism, capitalism, and other worldviews may posit nonphysical realities (see box 8.3). "Religion" is not the only term that can usefully speak of such traditions.

Importantly, this use of "transcendence" does not imply that whatever is referred to either exists or is "transcendent" ontologically (i.e., actually above, beyond, or outside the world). Furthermore, it is not, in some terminology, distinct from "immanence" (i.e., claims that the "divine" is within the world or the self). "Transcendence" should be read simply as a signifying marker of the claims noted. Whether the claim is that there is an all-powerful (omnipotent) creator deity, that trees are our ancestors, that "supernatural" powers/forces within the world direct our lives, or whatever else, all are here captured by transcendence as a conceptual category.

CASE STUDY 1A. FALUN GONG: RELIGION OR SELF-CULTIVATION PRACTICE?

Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa) is a Chinese tradition that teaches a form of *qigong* (often Chi Gung), slow rhythmic movements designed to promote physical and moral well-being. It was suppressed by the Chinese government as an "evil cult." While the suppression is often framed, by Western commentators, as violating freedom of religion and belief, Falun Gong members normally do not accept that they are a religion, preferring the term "self-cultivation tradition."

WHAT IS FALUN GONG?

In the 1980s, the Chinese government started promoting scientific investigations into the health benefits of *qigong*. This resulted in a huge upsurge, which the Chinese media termed "*qigong* fever." Falun Gong, founded by Li Hongzhi in 1994, became perhaps the largest of the *qigong* movements. As for the name:

- *Falun* alludes to Buddhist teachings.
- *Gong* signifies "hard work" or "practice."
- *Dafa* means "great law."

Therefore, Falun Gong/Dafa refers to the practice/effort of cultivating spiritual laws or truths.

As Li's following grew, he emphasized moral development over health practice, but both were integral. His teachings drew from Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion, and *qigong*. It involved reincarnation and a cosmic worldview with buddhas, daos, and gods as teachers, but Li himself was the greatest teacher. The Chinese government became framed as an evil spirit when it started to suppress Falun Gong. The central ideas can be found in Li's main book, *Zhuan Falun* (*Revolving Dharma Wheel*).

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

By the late 1990s, the Chinese government had started suppressing *qigong* fever for promoting "superstition." Support changed to derision. Falun Gong was often singled out for attack, with events coming to a head in 1999. In response to a critical TV program in the city of Tianjin, Falun Gong protesters demanded an apology at the TV station. This was a fairly well-known routine, a demand for an apology was met with one, and both sides were satisfied. However, this time, police beat back the protesters. Seeking recompense, it seems the Falun Gong protesters were told to appeal to the central government in Beijing. What happened next changed everything.

Rather than a small protest, ten thousand members of the movement sat in silent meditation outside the central government headquarters, just next to Tiananmen Square. They were probably met by Premier Zhu Rongji, who told them that their complaints would be dealt with, and they dispersed. However, shortly afterward, President Jiang Zemin issued an announcement calling Falun Gong an "evil cult," outlawing the movement. Many members were arrested and sent to prison or labor camps for "deconversion." There are also allegations of torture. From a huge movement, with more members than the Communist Party, it declined.

Falun Gong members protested the suppression, while the world press took up their cause. Notably, one alleged Falun Gong protest involved seven members who attempted self-immolation in 2001. It is not clear whether they were Falun Gong practitioners, or whether this event had any sanction from leaders, but it marked a turning point in perceptions of Falun Gong from being an unfairly suppressed group to being a movement that was radical and dangerous.[35]

TERMINOLOGY AND THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Falun Gong members do not normally claim they belong to a religion, preferring "self-cultivation practice." This is partly because, in China, religion (*zongjiao*) refers to five specific traditions (see box 1.2). Moreover, *zongjiao* does not denote "self-cultivation practice," which signifies activities such as *qigong* and Tai Chi—simplified and popularized practices derived from Daoist practices of biospiritual cultivation ("internal alchemy").[36] All are based in Chinese cosmology, which is linked to this concept of self-cultivation (see box 1.11). Therefore, calling something a self-cultivation practice is not

BOX 1.11 **CHINESE COSMOLOGY AND SELF-CULTIVATION**

Chinese cosmology makes no distinction between the body and the soul/spirit. Rather, the self is seen as a microcosm of the universe, and so physical techniques are seen as capable of helping to purify/align the self with the universal Way (*Dao*). In Chinese thought, the whole cosmos (physical, mental, and spiritual) is composed of the same "stuff": psychospiritual matter (*qi,* often translated as "breath"). The "spiritual" is simply more refined *qi;* "matter" is less refined *qi.* Indeed, ethics is related to this. Having pure *qi* relates to good moral character, and darkened *qi* indicates the opposite.[1] Therefore, self-cultivation practice denotes things we perhaps would not normally see as part of a religion: physical practice and health (but linked to spirituality and morality); not being necessarily tied to beliefs or doctrines (though rooted in concepts of *qi* and a wider cosmological schema); martial arts practice (e.g., Tai Chi or Kung Fu). Given the connection of body and spiritual transformation in Chinese thought, the practices discussed here are sometimes termed "biospiritual cultivation" in English. "Self-cultivation" can refer to a variety of practices which may be more focused upon bodily movements and health practices to those more focused on meditation. In general, they are simplified forms of originally Daoist practices of "internal alchemy" (*neidan*), which from around the eighteenth century became taught in practices and lineages beyond Daoist traditions.[2]

1 See Paul Hedges, "China," in *Religion and Everyday Life and Culture,* ed. Richard Hecht and Vincent Biondo, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010): 45–82, 47–48.

2 See Vincent Goosaert, "Daoists in the Modern Chinese Self-Cultivation Market: The Case of Beijing, 1850–1949," in *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity,* ed. David Palmer and Liu Xun (Berkeley: California University Press, 2012): 123–53.

simply a different classification, but presupposes a very different form of practice and activity. The fundamental assumptions of self-cultivation are very different from those of the WRP.

Once suppressed, Falun Gong was referred to as an "evil cult," or *xiejiao* (see box 1.5), which put it in the category of a public order concern. Benjamin Penny has argued that Falun Gong fits our typical conception of a "religion," as it:[37]

- draws from Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion;
- has a pantheon of deities and supernatural beings;
- involves belief in reincarnation and the laws of *karma* (retribution in future lives for bad deeds, and reward for good);
- portrays a cosmic battle between good and evil;
- has some form of "salvation" offered through Li and the practice of Falun Gong;

- has a form of scripture;
- has a messianic teacher (Li); and
- has an organization with various levels or initiations.

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL CASE

While Falun Gong is a *xiejiao* in China by government decree, elsewhere courts have had to determine whether it is a religion. Two Asian jurisdictions with comparable traditions of law, Hong Kong and Singapore (due to colonialism, their systems evolved from British Common Law), have reached different conclusions. The Hong Kong Court of First Instance in Chu Woan Chyi v. Director of Immigration considered the question. In the ruling, Judge Hartmann noted that although described as "a spiritual movement" by "practitioners," they "do not classify it as a 'religion'"; the judge looked to guidelines from an Australian High Court case:

> One of the more important indicia of "a religion" involves belief in the supernatural . . . that really extends beyond that which is capable of perception by the sense . . . . Another is that the ideas relate to man's nature and place in the universe and his relation to things supernatural. A third is that the ideas are accepted by adherents as requiring or encouraging them to observe particular standards or codes of conduct or to participate in specific practices having supernatural significance. A fourth is that . . . adherents . . . constitute an identifiable group or identifiable groups.[38]

Weighting "objective" over "subjective" criteria, Hartmann decided that Falun Gong was a religion, giving it legal protections in Hong Kong. In the Singapore High Court, in Ng Chye Huay v. PP, the "subjective" criteria of the self-declaration of Falun Gong was given greater weight. Therefore, in Singapore, Falun Gong is, legally speaking, not a religion but a self-cultivation practice. A different outcome was reached in each case even though the same legal standards were applied.

REFLECTION

Some questions can help us think through these issues:

1. If you were an advocate of Falun Gong, would you want to speak about it as a religion or not? Think about what consequences and meanings would follow from this, for yourself and others, in your country and globally.
2. Considering the legal disagreements, would you favor the approach taken by Hong Kong or Singapore? Why?
3. Are there analytic benefits in calling Falun Gong a religion? What aspects of the practice, belief, behavior, or nature of it and its followers are likely to be brought out or hidden? How convinced are you by Penny's characterization?

4. Does the concept of "self-cultivation practice" provide an alternative to "religion"? Could we imagine other traditions in this way? Try using the concept of "self-cultivation practice" to classify Buddhism or Christianity (or another "religion"; see box 9.6). See what aspects of the tradition are highlighted or hidden.

CASE STUDY 1B. CHRISTIANS AND ANCESTOR VENERATION: RELIGION OR CULTURE?

One common distinction is between "religion" and "culture" (see box 1.6). To consider this distinction, we discuss ways that Christians in Asia have made sense of ancestral sacrifices, something that tears families apart both in the past and today.

BEING A FAITHFUL CHILD AND ANCESTRAL VENERATION

Across much of Asia, a fundamental virtue is filial piety—the respect a child owes to their parents. Because the parent gave life to the child, sons and daughters should be obedient, and do their utmost to repay the debt of life. This is linked to ancestor veneration—performing sacrifices and rituals to remember and honor parents, grandparents, and significant forebears.[39] The question of whether a convert to Christianity can engage in ancestral sacrifices has serious social and personal implications. A child who refuses to engage in such rites can be disowned by their parents and families. To not perform them is to disrespect parents, family, and essentially the whole culture.

While ancestor veneration is often linked to Confucianism, it is a common part of East Asian religiosity. Confucian texts merely codified various practices, especially those related to imperial ancestral rites.

CHRISTIANS MEET THE ANCESTORS

Depending on where you are, and what form of Christianity, Christians in Asia may or may not practice ancestral veneration. A key factor is whether the practice is seen as "religious" or "cultural." In Christian theological terms, the debate concerns "worship" and "veneration."

- Worship assumes ancestors are seen as supernatural entities, even deities, capable of responding to intercessions or punishing those who do not make the correct sacrifices. For Christians, worship can only be offered to God.
- Veneration means paying due respect to honored descendants. As respect, it can be linked to Christian veneration of saints, or simply to "honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12).

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and other Jesuit missionaries who dressed as Confucian scholars, argued that rituals to honor Confucius and the ancestors were veneration.

A Confucian ancestral shrine containing the tablet that represents the founding ancestor of the lineage, Andong, South Korea.

They made high-profile converts to Catholic Christianity at the Chinese imperial court. However, other missionaries argued the sacrifices to Confucius and ancestors were worship. To try to help mediate, Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722) wrote to the Pope explaining that these rituals were merely respect, reflecting how many elite Confucian scholars understood them. However, following reports from other missionaries of what they perceived as "worship" among ordinary people, the Pope decreed, in 1704, against the Jesuits. Vehement disputes between rival Catholic Christians led Emperor Yongzheng (1678–1735) to declare Christianity an "evil cult" (*xiejiao;* see box 1.5) in 1724. The debate still rages.

FUNERALS, INCENSE, BOWING

Differing ideas about ancestral veneration persist today.

- Many Daoists in Singapore say funerary practices such as lighting incense and bowing to ancestral tablets (small, traditionally wooden, tablets with the names of the deceased) are religious acts.
- Many Confucian lineage heads in Korea will say these acts are not religious but only cultural.

Differing and changing Christian allegiances, theologies, and locations are also important. Today, most Catholics understand ancestral sacrifices as veneration, and allow

devotees to bow to ancestral tablets and use incense sticks at Buddhist or Daoist funerals to respect/venerate the dead. They see this as part of Chinese culture. Indeed, in Taiwan, Catholic funerals often resemble those of other Chinese religions, with incense sticks and ancestral tablets, although Catholic funerals in Singapore look more like Western ones. However, Protestants in Korea and Singapore tend to see lighting incense sticks or bowing to ancestral tablets as a religious act and therefore as worship, although Protestants in Hong Kong typically see it as veneration and cultural.

REFLECTIONS

We can ask various questions about this from different angles:

1. If you were a Protestant Christian from a traditional Confucian household in Korea, how would you choose between honoring your parents and family (a biblical as well as a Confucian/Korean virtue), and following your Christian tradition (your pastor says ancestral sacrifice is worship)? Think about the following: What social effects follow? Does being a Christian mean also leaving your culture and family? Put another way, is being Confucian and Christian a contradiction?
2. Do you agree that making a religion/culture divide can never be a matter of academic analysis? Is it always a theological debate? Do scholars simply report on how religious insiders (see chapter 2) make these distinctions?

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QUESTIONS AND CONNECTING THOUGHTS

The questions raised in this chapter permeate the whole book. What we think religion is, and whether the concept is meaningful, determines how and what we study; issues further explored in chapters 2, 3, and 9. Some scholars, and perhaps some readers, will argue we should abandon religion. However, other scholars, and maybe other readers, will argue that, while imperfect, the concept can help us think about society and human activity. This book works on the basis of the latter, which is linked to various arguments we make throughout (see introduction and chapters 5, 8, and 9). Nevertheless, we should stop and think every time we see or use the word "religion." Some issues touched upon here are discussed more thoroughly elsewhere; especially notable are the themes of religion's relationship to elite, colonial, and male norms (see, respectively, chapters 3, 7, and 10), and connections to politics and the secular (chapters 18, and 16, respectively).

We conclude with some questions to help think through the issues raised:

1. Do you think we can use the category "religion" as an academic category? Why or why not?
2. How do you, or your culture/society, define religion? More particularly: Why are certain things classified as religion, and why are other things not so classified?

3. Which potentially controversial groups are classified in your country as religions? By whom and when were these decisions made? Who makes these decisions? Think about such traditions as Jediism, Scientology, yoga, Wicca, Falun Gong, ISKCON/the Hare Krishna movement, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (you can Google these if you are not familiar with them). Note: In nations there may be regional variations; for example, in the US, state courts have differing rulings on whether yoga is a religion.
4. We have raised related terms such as "cult," "magic," and "superstition" (see boxes 1.5, 7.8, 9.4, and 12.2; see also chapter 3). How, in traditions or countries you are familiar with, are divisions made between acceptable beliefs and practices (probably labeled "religion") and unacceptable ones (possibly labeled "superstitions" or "cults")?

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