The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-cultural World

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Abstract

Few seem to have difficulty in distinguishing between religious and secular institutions, yet there is widespread disagreement regarding what "religion" actually means. Indeed, some go so far as to question whether there is anything at all distinctive about religions. Hence, formulating a definition of "religion" that can command wide assent has proven to be an extremely difficult task. In this article I consider the most prominent of the many rival definitions that have been proposed, the majority falling within three basic types: intellectual, affective and functional definitions. I conclude that there are pragmatic reasons for favouring the formerly popular view that essentialist definitions of "religions" are inadequate, and that religions should be construed, instead, as possessing a number of "family resemblances". In so arguing, I provide a response to the view that there is nothing distinctive about religions, as well as to the recent claim that religions do not exist.

Our world contains a striking diversity of religious traditions. Given that most of us probably have no trouble recognizing such traditions as religious, it is perhaps surprising that there is little agreement about what religion is or, indeed, if "it" is anything distinctive at all. Scholars have sought to define religion so as to identify both what makes something a religion and what, if anything, distinguishes religions from secular social organizations like clubs. Elementary though this task may seem, it has proven difficult to formulate a definition of

religion that can command wide assent. Many rival definitions have been proposed, most of which can be classified as examples of one of three basic types:[1] intellectual definitions, affective definitions, and functional definitions.

Rival Definitions of Religion

Intellectual definitions stipulate that the defining, or essential, feature of religion is belief about a particular sort of object. The following definition, suggested by James Martineau, is of this type: "Religion is the belief in an ever living God".[2] While definitions of this type highlight something important about religions—the undeniable fact that propositional beliefs typically play a significant role within them—nevertheless, they take no account of other, equally prominent, features of religion. They fail to recognize, for example, the centrality of "religious" emotions like piety, the importance of faith, and the key role of traditional practices. Yet each would seem to constitute typical features of many religions. A further problem is that defining religion in terms of belief that has a particular kind of object, such as God, entails that certain belief systems which are routinely regarded as religions—Theravada Buddhism, for example—would have to be classed as non-religious; an entailment which strikes many as counter-intuitive. To avoid this problem, one might suggest that any kind of belief would suffice, as long as it was held with sufficient seriousness and intensity. However, building into intellectual definitions conditions about the way a belief is held is tantamount to admitting that intellectual definitions by themselves are inadequate. It would also allow any kind of belief system to be a candidate for the label "religious", provided only that it was held with sufficient passion.

Moreover, we do not need to look to non-monotheistic religions to see the inadequacy of intellectual definitions. For they would not even seem to be applicable to Judaism. As Eugene Borowitz claims: "for the Jew, religion cannot be so easily identified with the affirmation of a

given content of belief".[3] As Borowitz further points out, such definitions would seem to be particularly suited to Protestant forms of Christianity, which do tend to portray religion as essentially the affirmation of a set of beliefs. Indeed, those who propose intellectual definitions would seem to regard Protestant Christianity as the paradigmatic form of religion, and such a standpoint is clearly inadequate today in an increasingly multi-cultural world. Let us therefore consider another type of definition, and see if it is any less problematic.

Affective definitions of religion regard faith, and the emotions that characteristically accompany it, as the defining, or essential, features of religion. George Lindbeck refers to this type of definition as "experiential-expressive" because definitions of this type focus on "the 'experiental-expressive' dimension of religion", and interpret "doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations."[4] As Lindbeck observes, despite their considerable dissimilarities, intellectual and affective definitions are akin insofar as they are both *religious* types of definition. In other words, they describe religion from a perspective that focuses on features of religion that are important to believers. Thus, these two approaches, or combinations of them, are typically adopted by theologians and other religiously-committed scholars.[5]

The most well known affective definition was proposed by a foundational figure within modern Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher stipulated that the "essence of religion consists in the feeling of absolute dependence".[6] While exactly what Schleiermacher meant by "feeling" in this context is, of course, subject to a variety of interpretations, this definition is clearly a product of his conception of religion as, primarily, a way of experiencing reality rather than a set of doctrinal formulations. Useful though his definition may be, it is clearly a reaction against intellectual definitions. As such, it is, perhaps, too one-sided to serve as an objective definition. By defining religion purely in terms of a certain kind of feeling—the feeling of absolute dependence—Schleiermacher would seem to underestimate the important role played within many religions by religious

teachings, doctrines and creeds. While Schleiermacher did not deny that religions typically incorporated such features as teachings, doctrines and creeds, in undervaluing the importance of such intellectual components of religions, he presents, what many have regarded as, a distorted picture of religion. Moreover, his definition appears to be biased towards his own religious tradition. It may well be that the kind of feeling he focuses upon is the defining feature of Lutheran Christianity (or, at least, was so during his lifetime). However, such a feeling would not appear to be central to, for example, most forms of Buddhism[7] or, to take another example, to Daoism. If that is the case, then the feeling of absolute dependence cannot be the defining feature of *all* religions.

Another criticism that might be leveled against Schleiermacher's definition is that the feeling of absolute dependence may be experienced by both religious people and self-avowedly non-religious people—which, again, suggests that such a feeling does not constitute a defining feature of religion. For example, environmentalists can have a feeling of absolute dependence upon the natural world without thereby holding a religious attitude (although some do hold one). Schleiermacher himself, however, saw this as an advantage of his theory. He believed that people mistakenly perceived themselves as non-religious because they rejected formalized religious doctrines and official religious institutions; but rejecting these and rejecting religion were in his opinion two quite distinct activities.[8] Thus, Schleiermacher is quite happy to insist that a necessary and sufficient condition for being religious is that one experience the feeling of absolute dependence. It was precisely this kind of view that the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, criticized in his influential work *The Future of an Illusion*. Freud claimed that it was a mistake to describe "as 'deeply religious' anyone who admits to a sense of man's insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe".[9] Rather, only those who seek a remedy for this feeling are genuinely religious. In his view: "The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world—such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the word."[10]

Indeed, in Freud's account, religion is a remedy for the kind of feeling referred to by Schleiermacher. On this view, religious practices such as ceremonies and rituals, if successful, function to remedy the disturbing sensation of "man's insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe". Hence, Schleiermacher might be accused of confusing the cause of religion with the meaning of "religion".[11]

This brings us to the third type of definition of religion: functional definitions. These concentrate on the function of religion as its defining, or essential, feature. The particular function that religion is thought to serve is not always, however, the one that Freud identified. Rather, the purported function of religion is sometimes construed more broadly. Consider, for example, the anthropologist J. G. Frazer's definition: "By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man…".[12] Frazer, then, defines religion in terms of its supposedly propitiatory or conciliatory function. But do all religions serve such a function? It would seem not. For yet again, Buddhism constitutes a clear counter-example. It is even questionable whether the various monotheisms should be seen as fulfilling this function. Moreover, it seems implausible to hold that religions as diverse as Lutheran Christianity, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Daoism all serve the same function—however broadly this function is conceived.

This brief survey might suggest that what each type of definition regards as the defining, or essential, feature of religion should be incorporated into a comprehensive definition: one that would give due weight to the intellectual, the affective and the functional components of religion. Unfortunately, such a comprehensive definition would be problematic because, like the various types of definition examined above, it would either encompass too much or too little. For example, there would be nothing to exclude secular humanism or Marxism from counting as religions. Moreover, one could not respond to the problem of including too much by building the notion of a religious ultimate, or God, into the definition. That strategy would certainly exclude secular humanism and Marxism, but it would also exclude "religions" like

Theravada Buddhism and Daoism (in which the notion of God does not play a significant role). Clearly, any definition of religion that failed to include these principal forms of religion would be severely inadequate.

In addition, not only does each type of definition considered above fail to apply to mainstream forms of eastern religious traditions, but each also seems inapplicable to Judaism. Some argue that a definition of religion inclusive of Judaism would have to acknowledge that being Jewish involves a relationship to the Jewish community.[13] Yet no prominent intellectual, affective or functional definition emphasizes the religious person as part of a community. But surely, this consideration would apply to Christianity and Islam, too. Most, if not all, forms of Christianity conceive individual Christians to be intrinsically part of the ecclesial community. Likewise, Muslims do not stand alone but are part of the *umma*—the Muslim community. The importance of this dimension of religiosity is apparent if one considers what takes place when a person converts to one of the Abrahamic religions: they are welcomed into the community of the Jewish People, the Church, or the *umma*. Because the types of definition surveyed above fail to acknowledge this important dimension of Abrahamic monotheisms, many find them inadequate.

Clearly, though, any assessment of the adequacy of a definition of religion is likely to be influenced by the kind of theory of religion one presupposes. Definitions are, it might be claimed, miniature versions of the theories which inspire them. And there is an important difference between *religious* theories of religion and *naturalistic* ones.[14] Typically, theories of the former type are developed by thinkers belonging to some particular religious tradition. They usually presuppose a religious interpretation of ourselves and our world, and they attempt to justify that interpretation by providing an account of the divine origin of the religion in question. A religious theory might, for example, appeal to the role of prophets or angels as divine messengers instrumental in the formation of a particular historical religious tradition. Or, more generally, religion may be conceived as a response to revelation in the

form of divine word or deed. James Thrower claims that religious theories can be identified by the way they regard religion as ontologically primary; that is, by viewing religion as capable of explaining other phenomena and in no need of explanation itself.[15] Naturalistic theories, on the other hand, regard the phenomena of religion to be in need of some explanation. In contrast to religious theories, they attempt to explain religion by appealing to natural facts. Freud's theory of religion, for example, is a naturalistic theory that tries to explain religion by appeal to facts about human psychology.[16] Influential forms of naturalistic theory have been proposed by Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and, more recently, the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson. Such theories were especially prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth. Their popularity seems to rise and wane in accordance with the success or failure of the more general psychological, political, economic, social or biological theory within which they are embedded.

In line with this distinction between religious and naturalistic theories of religion, definitions of religion can be categorized as either *religious* or *naturalistic*.[17] Clearly, a non-sectarian scholar will be likely to find many of the available religious definitions of religion unacceptable. This is because many of them presuppose the truth of certain key religious claims—such as, for example, that there "are manifestations of a Power which transcends our knowledge".[18] Nevertheless, many scholars remain cautious of naturalistic definitions of religion. This is because, as we have seen, they are derived from naturalistic theories of religion which are themselves part of highly controversial theories of much broader scope. While naturalistic theories remain influential, they have not been widely accepted because they rely on assumptions about religion which are highly contested—and, for the same reason, naturalistic definitions also fail to achieve widespread support.

Given the difficulties of both religious and naturalistic theories of religion, some scholars have attempted to stipulate a definition that presupposes neither a religious nor a naturalistic theory. Keith Yandell argues that the following definition is neutral between religious and

naturalistic theories: "a religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices".[19] While Yandell may well have succeeded in maintaining a neutral stance between religious and naturalistic definitions of religion, his definition nevertheless exhibits the now familiar problem of including too much. Maoism, for example, is "a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it" and which "bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation" and, moreover, "expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices". Yet most people would want to say that Maoism is most accurately classified as a political ideology and not as a religion.

The failure of a definition such as Yandell's to demarcate the religious from the non-religious domain, without taking a stance on the religious *versus* naturalistic issue, might suggest that we should consider religion from another perspective. It may be that religions fall under the wider concept "culture". Indeed, this has been suggested by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who argues that religions should be analyzed as cultural systems.[20] Geertz took the concept "culture" to denote "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conception expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life".[21] Clearly, both religious and secular "patterns of meaning" would fit under this definition of culture. Nevertheless, Geertz offers a definition of religion that aspires to identify religions as a sub-class of cultures. According to Geertz, "a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, 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".[22] There is no doubt that this definition of religion has provided

scholars with a useful perspective from which to study religions.[23] Nevertheless, it is not unproblematic. First, adherents of Marx's historical materialism, especially when they wave red flags, may well be counted as religious on this definition. And second, religions in which symbols appear to play a relatively minor role—Quakerism, for example—do not seem to register on Geertz's theory. Indeed, religions would seem to be more diverse and complex than his theory allows. While telling us part of the story, he inevitably leaves much untold. Indeed, every theory presupposes some account of what data will be relevant and what must be explained. With a limited definition of "religion", theorists, in focusing on this data, will inevitably draw attention away from other aspects of religion—aspects that another brand of theorist may regard as of key importance. Each theory we have considered, then, comes with its own peculiar biases. Perhaps for this reason, theories of religion would seem to rival religions in the diversity they exhibit, and the prevailing definitions of religion they have generated seem to have shed little light on what—if anything—all and only religions have in common.

An Alternative Approach

Given the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory definition, the suspicion arose that the attempt to define "religion" is futile. In the early 1960s, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that the attempt was misguided, and could not succeed, because the term "religion" does not pick out phenomena that are naturally grouped together. In other words, religions do not possess some common defining feature that the term "religion" picks out. According to Smith, "religion" is a concept created by modern western scholars and superimposed upon a variety of phenomena; the superimposition serving to create the impression that "religion" is a unified thing. This superimposition gradually began to take place, Smith believes, in the eighteenth century. At that time there was a sudden swell of interest in other cultures on the part of

western scholars. Prior to the introduction of the concept "religion", Smith argues, there were simply a variety of interconnected practices and beliefs embedded in the various cultures of the world. Moreover, these beliefs and practices could not be neatly parceled into either of the two, mutually exclusive, categories of "religious" and "secular". Smith further claims that there was no need for the term "religion" until the various cultures of the world began to have prolonged encounters with one another, particularly during the colonial period.[24] One result of the superimposition of the new concept was, Smith opines, that people increasingly viewed themselves as members of ideologically-opposed communities. Moreover, in many cases, they came to regard themselves as in exclusive possession of both truth and the promise of salvation.

In Smith's view, then, "religion" is a divisive concept that stimulates ideological confrontation. Thus, he counsels that the concept be abandoned, pointing out that people

> throughout history and throughout the world have been able to *be* religious without the assistance of a special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies. In fact, I have come to feel that, in some ways, it is probably easier to be religious without the concept; that the notion of religion can become an enemy to piety. One might almost say that the concern of the religious man is with God; the concern of the observer is with religion.… In any case, it is not altogether foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept "religion" is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself.[25]

Persuasive as this position has seemed to many, it is nevertheless deeply problematic. The theory does not, for example, enable us to understand how the wars of religion, which ravaged Western Europe in the transition from the medieval to the modern period, were *religious* wars. Nor does it seem able to account for the persecution of Jewish people that was a persistent feature of European history long before the modern era. Moreover, there is

evidence that a major force in the extremely lengthy development of certain religious traditions has been their awareness of rival traditions.[26] It may be that Smith's theory provides a more accurate characterization of the indigenous belief systems of India and Africa, many of which to this day remaining localized and lacking a trans-geographical organizing body, than it does of the religions of Europe—particularly as they developed in the Common Era.

It may be, though, that such criticisms miss the main point of Smith's argument. In the passage quoted above, Smith characterizes the concept "religion" as the enemy of religion. He thus appears to accept that there is such a thing as religion. Perhaps we should, therefore, interpret him as denying that the concept "religion" appropriately latches onto that thing. But if Smith's concerns are solely about the limitations of our present conception of "religion", then surely they can be allayed by refining the concept. And the attempt to refine our concept better to reflect what religions actually are is surely what motivates scholars to seek definitions of religion.

Despite these problems, many scholars agree with Smith that the search for a defining feature of religion is futile. Moreover, there is widespread recognition that the problems encountered in attempting to define religion might not originate from anything unusual about the phenomenon of religion, but rather from the assumption that concepts represent things that are grouped together by virtue of having a common defining feature, or essence. Perhaps the various religions do not have any defining features, or essence, in common? The argument that, contrary to surface appearances, certain concepts do not have a single, essential, defining feature was, of course, advanced by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein illustrates his theory of language by means of the word "game", claiming that it is fruitless to search for a single feature that all games have in common.[27] Prior to reflection, most of us probably assume that if things are games, then there must be some feature they all possess that makes them all games. But as Wittgenstein asks:

> What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something in common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.[28]

Wittgenstein shows that if we consider any feature that some games possess, we will find some other game that does not possess it. Competitive activity, for example, may at first sight appear to be a feature possessed by all games. However, counter-examples are easy to come by: certain card games, solitaire for instance, are not competitive. As no feature is possessed by all games, no single feature can be used to define what games are.

Wittgenstein's analysis of the word "game" is meant to show that concepts are not necessarily as simple as they might at first appear. A single concept, like "game", can be used to refer to things that do not share any defining feature. He claims that we are misled by such concepts if we assume that there must be some feature possessed by everything falling under one of them. In Wittgenstein's view, many of our concepts are like this. Later thinkers, inspired by his approach, have proposed that one reason why religion is so difficult to define might be because "religion" is one of these concepts that do not refer to things possessing a single defining characteristic. Perhaps, instead, "religion" is a complex concept used to refer to things sharing a number of features—and thereby exhibiting a number of "family resemblances"—not all of which need be present.

Consider Theravada Buddhism and Christianity: both revere a holy founder, but Theravada Buddhists, unlike Christians, do not believe in a God. So these religions exhibit a family resemblance as well as an important difference. Contrast these religions with Shaivite Hinduism, whose adherents do not revere a holy founder but who do believe in a God. Were we to compare and contrast all religions, we may well find nothing that they all have in common, but we might nevertheless discover many overlapping resemblances between them.

In fact, increased knowledge of world religions seems to many to support this assessment. The study of religions discloses an enormous diversity of beliefs and practices interwoven with striking resemblances. The diversities can be so extreme that even two forms of the "same" tradition might seem to have little important in common (never mind one common defining feature). Nevertheless, both can be recognized as bearing a family resemblance to one another.[29] Such observations, combined with the many difficulties involved in the search for a definition of religion which is neither too inclusive nor too exclusive, have led many to adopt a "family resemblance approach" to religion;[30] John Hick being one prominent advocate of this approach.[31] Hick advises us to abandon the search for a definition of religion and instead recognize that religions have family resemblances that allow us to identify them as falling under the concept "religion".

This approach, however, is not unproblematic. If we regard as a member of the "religious family" everything that has some feature in common with standard examples of religion, the concept "religion" will have such a wide scope that it may well be analytically useless.[32] Moreover, there would seem to be a host of resemblances between "religious" and "secular" belief systems.[33] Given so many resemblances, how could we determine which of them allow us to identify something as a member of the religious family? To decide which resemblances are relevant and which are not would seem to require additional criteria. Hick, in recognizing this need, suggests that, because religious beliefs and practices characteristically have a deep importance for those who hold them, Paul Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern" might stand as our central criterion. In other words, beliefs and practices are to be recognized as part of the "religious family" by virtue of being invested with "ultimate concern". Hick claims that this "quality of importance pervades the field of religious phenomena. Not everything that has more than transient importance to us is religious; but all authentic as opposed to merely nominal religiousness seems to involve a sense of profound importance".[34] Notice that this is not offered as a definition of religion but as a criterion by which we can rule out certain things

as excluded from the family of religions. It seems, then, that without the help of an additional criterion, the family resemblance approach is a blunt analytical tool that cannot distinguish between cases of religion and cases of non-religion. However, a new problem is raised by the attempt to provide a supplementary criterion. Any criterion will reflect its proponent's assumptions about the nature of religion; this is clearly true, for example, of Hick's criterion. But the family resemblance approach was offered in order to avoid such assumptions.

At this point it appears that we have come full circle. What one is prepared to regard as a religiously-relevant family resemblance will depend upon what one means by "religion". Given certain assumptions, one might include belief systems such as humanism and Marxism; given certain others, one might not. One way out of this impasse might be to resist the urge to supplement the family resemblance approach with a separate criterion, and to accept that in some cases there will be no clear answer to the question of whether something is part of the family of religions or not. Hick concedes this much even while advocating his additional criterion. For he claims that in some cases—Confucianism and Christian Science, for example—there may not be a clear answer. In such cases, he opines, one can merely note "their positions within a complex, ramified network of related phenomena" and "[h]aving done this we have resolved—or perhaps dissolved—the problem of the definition of 'religion'".[35]

Some have held, however, that the fact of there being no clear answer to the question whether or not something is a religion or religious is symptomatic of a deeper problem afflicting the concept "religion" and its cognates. Timothy Fitzgerald argues that the fact that "religion" has no clear meaning implies that there is no such thing as religion.[36] According to Fitzgerald, people have failed to define religion because there are no genuine religious phenomena to identify. Purported religious phenomena are, he argues, the result of our imposing an artificial conceptual division between the "religious" and the "secular" onto a world that does not exhibit any such distinction. It is to this conclusion that the existence of

the borderline cases discussed above points, in his view. Consequently, Fitzgerald proposes that "[r]eligion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category…".[37] And he concludes that, because it has no legitimate object, religious studies should be assimilated to cultural studies, and scholars of religion, as a distinct species of academic, should be retired. Thus, he claims, the concept "religion" and its cognates should be withdrawn from circulation.

Is it the case, however, that terms with no clear meaning are not analytically useful and should be eliminated from our discourse? Inspection will reveal that many of our terms lack a clear meaning. Perhaps, then, "religion" is "open textured" or an example of a vague concept. A vague concept typically has a range of applications that are undisputed alongside other possible applications in which there is no clear answer to the question of whether or not the concept is appropriately applied. While such concepts are philosophically interesting, they are by no means rare. Natural languages contain a large number of vague concepts, many of which being mundane. "Bald", for example, is a vague concept. How much hair must you have lost in order for the concept "bald" to apply appropriately to you? Many cases of hair-loss seem to be borderline cases in which it is neither definitely right nor definitely wrong to call a person bald. This is not usually taken to imply that there is something mysterious about baldness, or that we should drop the concept "bald". Nor does it raise doubts about whether there is such a thing as baldness. If we can accept that some of our concepts are like this, and that their vagueness does not make them unduly problematic, then why not regard "religion" as such a concept? Other examples of terms that lack a clear meaning, but which are analytically important nevertheless, are "species" and "mind". These have no clear or undisputed meaning, yet they are both central to their respective disciplines of biology and psychology. That such terms have no clear meaning generates questions which fuel research within these disciplines. It is not usually taken to suggest either that the terms be dropped or that the disciplines be assimilated into others that do not employ them. It seems open to us to

view "religion" in the same way. That it has no clear undisputed meaning may be what contributes to its ability to stimulate research programs. Such a lack of clear meaning would not, then, seem to constitute a good reason for phasing-out the term; just as dispute about the meaning of "species" or "mind" is not usually taken as sufficient grounds for dropping both the terms and the areas of study in which they are central. Fitzgerald's conclusion, then, does not seem to be entailed by his premises.

There is a further, more practical, reason, though, why we should resist the idea that religion does not constitute a distinct phenomenon. Consider again the question: why should we try to define religion? As we have seen, whether or not Marxism is a religion is one example of the type of question that has given rise to the search for a definition of religion. An appropriate definition of religion would enable us to determine what we can legitimately count as being covered by the term "religion". And this matters because there are a number of well-documented cases in which great significance is attached to the question of whether some particular belief system should be classified as a religion or not. It has not been uncommon, for example, for governments to call upon their citizens to fight in wars. But the governments of many countries exempted those citizens whose conscientious objection to participation in war was based on a religious belief—say, one that committed them to pacifism. Clearly, whether or not one's beliefs were counted as "religious" was of great importance in these circumstances. To take a concrete example, during the Second World War, the government of the United States called upon its citizens to fight. Many claimed exemption on the grounds of religious beliefs that committed them to pacifism. However, certain of the "religions" adhered to by would-be conscientious objectors were not recognized by the US government as religions. As a result, many found themselves denied the status of conscientious objectors, and were incarcerated for refusing to fight. Quakers as well as Hopis were denied conscientious-objector status, and were imprisoned because their respective belief systems were not officially recognized as religions.[38] In short, these pacifists were

imprisoned simply because the definition of religion adopted by the government of the United States excluded their "religion" from official recognition.

Such religious discrimination runs counter to the trend, dominant throughout much of the twentieth century, to accord greater value to religious freedom. Indeed, freedom of religion is identified as a significant human right in a landmark document of the last century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that

> [e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.[39]

Definitions of religion that are too limited in scope can be a serious impediment to the success of efforts to claim, or to protect, this right. So the debate about the best way to define "religion", which at first sight may have appeared purely academic, turns out to have wide ramifications with respect to vitally important human concerns. For this reason, we should be cautious of Fitzgerald's claim that there is no such thing as religion; a hard-won right to religious freedom will not elicit much respect if the existence of religion is seriously questioned.

This notwithstanding, if we consider what originally motivated the search for a definition of religion, we may find that there is some truth to Fitzgerald's claim. The search for a definition of religion can be seen as quintessentially modern insofar as modernity was the first era in which a firm distinction between religion and the rest of human activity was presupposed. As previous eras made no such distinction, they had no need of the concepts "religious" and "secular". Such concepts can be seen as a product of the modern impulse to separate "religion" from the rest of cultural life,[40] in order to underwrite the independent

autonomy of the "secular" realm of the social and political world. As Joseph D. Bettis comments:

> The attempt to describe religion as a separate and independent sphere of human activity did not appear until the nineteenth century. Schleiermacher's *On Religion* was one of the first books to regard it as an isolable subject. Prior to that a religious tradition was identified with the cultural tradition that provided the fundamental means of individual and social identification. Traditionally, religion referred to the basic guiding images and principles of an individual and a culture. Religion was identical with style of life.[41]

Given the provenance of the peculiarly modern attempt to distinguish "religion" from other areas of human activity, it is not surprising that religion should elude concise definition and, hence, appear to some as a fictional entity created by modern intellectuals. In a sense, then, we might argue that "religion" is a fictional entity: it seems not to be a ready-made feature of the world but rather a construction generated by a powerful desire to impose firm conceptual distinctions on a world that, perhaps, does not, in itself, exhibit them. However, in another sense, religion does not seem merely to be a fictional entity, for the result of projecting "religion" onto the world may well be that our world has come genuinely to exhibit it. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the desire to separate a "religious" from a "secular" realm may have led to the emergence of two distinct realms—a sphere of identifiable religious practices and institutions, on the one hand, and a sphere of secular practices and institutions that explicitly exclude the religious, on the other.[42] To complicate matters further, though, the creation of distinct "religious" and "secular" realms would not appear to have taken place at the same speed throughout all parts of the world.

It may seem that these problems are unlikely to affect our understanding of the major religious traditions. However, issues often arise regarding what counts as Judaism,

Christianity or Islam.[43] So, it may well be that these ancient and established religious traditions can best be seen as constituted by sub-traditions united by family resemblances—resemblances, moreover, that often appear to be obscured from the view of religious practitioners themselves. Religious traditionalists tend to opt for an essentialist view of their religious tradition, arguing that those who have let go of some particular beliefs or practices should not be considered genuine adherents of the faith. Analyzing religious traditions and sub-traditions in terms of family resemblances might have the advantage of granting us a perspective from which to examine a religion without having to accept uncritically the interpretation of that religion advanced by any one group within its family. It may also facilitate awareness of both the similarities between the different sub-traditions of one religion and the important differences between them. Moreover, this approach might also be fruitfully applied to portray the relationship between the three Abrahamic faiths. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam may be seen as diverging traditions within the extended family of Abrahamic monotheism. This approach thus provides a vantage point from which to study the three faiths simultaneously, without being compelled to make evaluative judgments concerning which is the "best" or the more authentic form of monotheism. And the same could be said of the non-Abrahamic faiths.

Conclusion

I have indicated some of the problems involved in defining "religion". We have seen that the term "religion" is both highly contentious and could be viewed as "essentially contested".[44] The debates generated by this term suggest that an essentialist understanding of either religion or religious people should be avoided. An essentialist claims that there are certain essential features that make a thing what it is, and these features allow us to define it as such. According to an essentialist about religion, religion is *one thing*, and all religions are

instances of that thing in virtue of possessing the same essential property or properties. What should we conclude from the implausibility of essentialism about religion? Surely not that there is no such thing as religion. Rather, we should embrace the more limited conclusion that it would be mistaken to assume that all religions exhibit the same essential features.

This conclusion has certain pragmatic advantages, which could, themselves, be regarded as justifying such an approach to the concept "religion". For it encourages us to take seriously the real differences that exist between religious traditions. Moreover, just as "religion" would not seem to be one thing, there is no good reason to suppose that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are each one homogeneous entity. Each of these religious traditions can itself be analyzed using the family resemblance approach. If these traditions are thought of as composed of sub-traditions possessing family resemblances, there will be less of an inclination to search for a homogeneous tradition that is, itself, highly contested. Nor will we be inclined to expect all those who adhere to any one of the major religions to accept exactly the same set of beliefs. This approach thus allows us to be sensitive to the diversity of religious belief and practice commonly found even within the "same" tradition, while simultaneously providing a framework for appreciating such diversity as part of richly textured and continuously evolving traditions. In a nutshell, while debates in the philosophy of language are ongoing,[45] there are pragmatic grounds for deploying a family resemblance approach. For, surely, in a multi-cultural world we need a theoretical approach to the study of religions that is not from the outset prejudicial to any religion. And a family resemblance approach seems most suited to this requirement.

[1]This typology is not, however, universally accepted, and some thinkers have proposed alternative schemes. According to William Alston, for example, religions are best categorized as predominantly "sacramental", "prophetic", or "mystical". See William Alston, "Religion" in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, volume 7 (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 143.

[2]Martineau's definition is cited in *ibid*.

[3]Eugene B. Borowitz, *A New Jewish Theology in the Making* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 44.

[4]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 16.

[5]Functional definitions, in contrast, as we shall see below, are *non-religious* definitions of religion. In seeking to define religion in naturalistic terms, those adopting this approach arrive at definitions that will inevitably seem inadequate to the vast majority of religious people. This type of definition, as Lindbeck points out, is typically adopted by scholars of religion who are not themselves committed to any faith, and who seek to explain religion from one of the perspectives offered by the social sciences. Lindbeck himself finds all of these approaches inadequate and, consequently, seeks to develop an alternative "cultural-linguistic" approach. The key to Lindbeck's analysis is the idea that "religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures". *Ibid*., p. 18.

[6]Cited in Alston, "Religion", *op. cit*., p. 141. And see F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), pp. 16f. Other examples of affective definitions are that of J. M. E. McTaggart and C. P. Tiele. McTaggart writes: "It seems to me that it [religion] may best be described as an emotion resting on a conviction of a harmony between ourselves and the universe at large"; while Tiele insists: "Religion is, in truth, that pure and reverential disposition or frame of mind which we call piety". Both quoted in Alston, "Religion", *op. cit*., p. 140.

[7]Amida Buddhism would, perhaps, constitute a notable exception.

[8]Schleiermacher's claim that rejecting religious doctrines and religious institutions is not the same as rejecting religion altogether seems to have been borne out by studies of late twentieth-century attitudes towards religion. See [author's article].

[9]Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W. D. Robson-Scott (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1962), pp. 28f.

[10]*Ibid*.

[11]*Ibid.* However, writer and director Dennis Potter would seem to be in agreement with Schleiermacher against Freud when he declares: "Religion to me has always been the wound and not the bandage". Dennis Potter, *Seeing Blossoms* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 5.

[12]Cited in Alston, "Religion", *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[13]See, for example, Borowitz, *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44f.

[14]For a survey of prominent examples of these rival theories, see James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999). Remarking on the sudden appearance of these theories in the West from the mid-eighteenth century, Thrower suggests that "it is only when religion has ceased to be at the living heart of a culture, that is, when its status has become problematic, that explanations to account for its existence come to the fore". *Ibid*., p. 3.

[15]*Ibid*.

[16]Naturalistic psychological theories typically suggest that religion originally arose out of a primitive mental state such as fear or guilt, with Freud being the most famous exponent of such a view. Alternatively, sociological theories, which are also naturalistic, typically propose that religious beliefs and practices arose to fulfill a social function. One such function could have been to stabilize society through encouraging people to conform to social norms. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) went so far as to suggest that religions originated in primitive human beings who worshipped society. See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[17]It should be noted that an important debate is currently taking place between those scholars of religion who regard religion as merely a human activity that can be completely analyzed by the methods of the social sciences and those who believe that such analyses cannot provide a complete explanation of religion. Arguing for the former, naturalistic stance, one protagonist declares: "*like all other aspects of human behavior*, those collections of beliefs, behaviors, and institutions we classify as 'religion' can be conceptualized and then explained as thoroughly human activity, with no mysterious distillate left over." Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. xi.

[18]Herbert Spencer, cited in Alston, "Religion", *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[19]Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 16.

[20]Geertz's work is voluminous. However, see, for example, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Chapter 4.

[21]*Ibid*., p. 89.

[22]*Ibid*., p. 90.

[23]Geertz's perspective continues to be developed by, among others, Russell T. McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald. See, for example, McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers*, *op. cit.* and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[24]Smith's thesis is taken even further by Timothy Fitzgerald when he claims that "[t]he construction of 'religion' and 'religions' as global, crosscultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Part of this process has been to establish an ideologically loaded distinction between the realm of religion and the realm of non-religion or the secular. By constructing religion and religions, the imagined secular world of objective facts, of societies and markets as the result of the free association of natural individuals, has also been constructed." *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[25]Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 19.

[26]This dynamic seems to have had a profound effect on the development of both Christianity and Islam, as these rival forms of monotheism were often perceived by their adherents as mutually threatening.

[27]See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), paragraph 66.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]Examples might include Quakerism and Roman Catholicism (both are forms of Christianity that exhibit striking diversity but which, nevertheless, retain a family resemblance) or Hasidic and Reconstructionist Judaism.

[30]At one stage, the Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach was almost universally accepted as the best method available for understanding "religion".

[31]See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 3–5. Ninian Smart's popular book *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973) was also instrumental in promoting the family resemblance approach.

[32]While Wittgenstein himself does not appear to have held that possession of a common feature was a sufficient condition for two things to bear a family resemblance, many of those who have subsequently discussed the family resemblance approach to religion would nevertheless seem to have made this assumption.

[33]For a discussion of this and other problems arising from the family resemblance theory, see Timothy

Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4.

[34]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, *op*. *cit*., p. 4.

[35]*Ibid*., p. 5.

[36]Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[37]*Ibid*., p. 4.

[38]For the case of the Hopis, see Frank Waters, *The Book of the Hopi* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 317–21.

[39]Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949).

[40]In *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Russell T. McCutcheon argues that the modern academic study of religion serves to reinforce the projection of these concepts onto the world, and is thereby collusive in distorting the phenomena.

[41]Joseph D. Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion* (London: SCM, 1975), p. 170.

[42]One need only think of the supposed separation of Church and state in certain liberal democracies.

[43]For example, members of the Ahmadiyya movement (founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, d. 1908) have always claimed to be Muslim; an identity which has often been denied them by others, leading to their persecution in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. There are reports of Ahmadis being sentenced to death on the charge of apostasy simply because they do not meet the criteria which, according to some Muslim governments, define what an orthodox Muslim believes. Likewise, there is little agreement among those adhering to the various forms of "orthodox" and "non-orthodox" Judaism concerning what should count as authentic Judaism. Moreover, the struggle on the part of some Christian groups to establish their version of the faith as exclusively correct has been a long and fraught one, and has continued into the twenty-first century.

[44]For the notion of "essential contestability", see W. B. Gallie, "Essentially contested concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955–6): 167–98.

[45]It should be noted that many philosophers now reject the Wittgensteinian approach to meaning, especially with regard to natural kinds (such as water). The impetus for this rejection has come from the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), and Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" in Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 215–71. On the Kripke-Putnam theory of meaning, "water" is taken to mean H_2O. However, religion would not seem to be a natural kind entity with a causally efficacious underlying structure *à la*

water, with its specific molecular structure that is presumed to be causally responsible for its observable properties. Hence, the family resemblance approach might be thought to remain viable in the case of a number of concepts, such as “religion”, that do not refer to those features of the world ordinarily studied by natural scientists.

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