Sebastian Gäb

Philosophy of Religion

Nomos Textbook

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Introduction

We all know that no one reads the introduction. But if you happen to be the sort of person who does, here are some quick facts about this book:

This is a somewhat biased overview. As you'll likely soon realize from the authors I quote, the topics and methodology I privilege, and even my style of writing, I have a certain preference for what is called *analytical* philosophy of religion. But then, any overview is biased. There is no view from nowhere, no neutral and objective perspective beyond all perspectives for us to take. We all have our own point of view, and the only way to leave it behind is by adopting a different one. The best response to this fact is to accept that one's perspective is only one among many and to try to maintain a healthy distance from it, something I hope I've succeeded in doing here. Hence, even though I describe what the field of philosophy of religion looks like from my point of view, I will occasionally point to other views as well. This, of course, is no substitute for genuine engagement with these alternative positions. Readers who want to know what the field looks like from another standpoint will simply have to read more books.

This book takes a systematic approach: it focuses on the questions and problems at the heart of philosophy of religion, not on the history of the field. My aim is not to give comprehensive accounts of different philosophers' positions; rather, I focus on issues and arguments that you will consistently encounter in philosophy of religion, across history and cultures. I don't provide surveys of current research, either; rather, I try to help you understand the questions discussed in philosophy of religion and some of the answers that have been proposed. My guiding principle has been to include only those topics, authors, and arguments that reflect what I take to be the answer to this question: what should you know once you have finished a first introduction to the philosophy of religion?

The structure of the book has a certain internal logic: the first chapter discusses what religion is in the first place and what the task of the philosophy of religion is. The next chapter introduces several arguments against religion, as these critical arguments are the background against which the debates in chapters 3 to 6 should be understood. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the relationship of religion to other areas of philosophy, and chapters 9 through 13 summarize debates about the nature and existence of God. This is followed by chapter 14 on death and immortality, which, appropriately, comes at the end because everything ends with death. The chapters can be read individually and don't build on each other, but of course, you can still read the book from cover to cover. At the end of each chapter, you will find some references to key sources and further reading on the topic in question. These references are deliberately kept brief and should only provide a first starting point for further research. For readers embarking on such research, it's also a good idea to take a look at the relevant chapters in handbooks and other introductions to philosophy of religion which are mentioned in the appendix. I have not aimed for completeness here; rather, I want to provide a few starting points for further research (e.g., if you're planning on writing a term paper), from which you can continue to dig deeper into the issue at hand.

The questions at the end of each chapter are intended not to test the reader on the chapter's content, but as open questions that can be discussed against the background of the chapter and that lend themselves to multiple different answers.

The book is divided into 14 chapters so as to fit into the schedule of an introductory course on the philosophy of religion. Each chapter can be covered in a single session, and with the sources listed at the end of each chapter, it would be fairly straightforward to build a syllabus for such a course.

This book is primarily written for students of philosophy, theology, and religious studies, but also for the general reader interested in religion and philosophy. I assume that those who read this book will have an interest in, but little to no prior knowledge of, the philosophy of religion. It's intended as a first introduction to this subject, with everything important explained as need arises throughout the book.

1 What is Religion?

Overview

There is no universally accepted definition of religion. The term has a long history, and its meaning is constantly changing. There is no analogous concept in other cultures outside the West, but the phenomenon of religion is universally observable. There are two approaches to defining the concept of religion: essentialist approaches define religion in terms of a core essence, whereas functionalist approaches define it through the role it plays. Both approaches face severe objections. Plausibly, religion should better be understood as a multidimensional, open concept. Philosophy of religion must be distinguished from religious studies and from theology. Its defining feature is that it asks the question whether religious beliefs are actually true. To answer this question, philosophy of religion clarifies religious concepts and examines arguments for and against religious beliefs.

Philosophy of religion means thinking philosophically about all kinds of questions concerning religion. But what *is* religion? As it turns out, this is not an easy question. We may have a reasonably clear notion of what a typical religion looks like, and thus we have no difficulties using the term in everyday life: we can perhaps name some religions and distinguish between religious and non-religious phenomena. But this concept (like so many others) quickly becomes unclear as soon as we start to reflect more carefully about what we actually mean by it. To see this, let's do a little philosophical warm-up exercise! Take a look at the following list and ask yourself whether or not each of these items is a religion or at least some kind of a religious phenomenon:

Christianity	Epicureanism
Tennis	Socialism
Buddhism	Christmas gifts
Sunday closures	Headscarves

Christianity. That's easy: Christianity is a religion. If you happen to live in a Western country, it's probably also the prototypical example of a religion for you and the religion you know best, simply because Christianity was, and in many cases still is, the dominant religion in Western culture. But people in non-Christian societies will have no trouble identifying Christianity as a religion, too.

Tennis. Not a religion, that's for sure. Or is it? Aren't there people who are tennis fans and play tennis with a quasi-religious zeal? And if that sounds a bit silly for tennis, what about football? Would it really be absurd to say that there are some people whose religion is football, and whose church is the stadium?

Buddhism. A religion, sure. But anyone who knows a little about Buddhism will also know that this question – Is Buddhism a religion? – is actually quite controversial. Some scholars have argued that Buddhism is not a religion at all, but rather a philosophy or a kind of early science of consciousness, or maybe even psychotherapy. In any case, Buddhism rejects the idea of a God. Some varieties of Buddhism even try to free the Buddha's teaching from all supernatural elements.

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Moreover, the Buddha himself was originally not understood as divine, but as a human being like any other, albeit one who has accomplished a unique feat. If Buddhism is a religion, it's one that is significantly different from the others we know.

Sunday closures. There is no doubt that the practice of keeping offices, schools, etc. closed on Sundays has a religious origin, namely the injunction from the Ten Commandments to 'remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.' But hasn't it become completely secularized nowadays and lost its religious roots? After all, most people today don't go to church anymore or spend much time thinking about religion, but simply enjoy the day off.

Epicureanism. The school of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270) is usually regarded as a philosophy, not a religion. But why, come to think of it? After all, it's a community held together by a common commitment to a particular doctrine, one that concerns ideas about the origin and nature of the universe, the nature of the gods, and the meaning and purpose of life. Given that we normally don't think of Epicureanism as a religion, it's surprising how much it has in common with typical religions.

Communism. Communism, of course, is not a religion. On the contrary, fighting against any form of organized religion and all belief in the supernatural belongs to the essence of communism. 'There are no saviors e'er will help us, Nor God, nor Caesar, nor Tribune,' as the *Internationale* says. But on the other hand, classical communism in particular has curiously religious traits: there are sacred texts, proclaimed by wise prophets whose words are not to be questioned (Marx and Engels and their works); there is a priestly caste that celebrates elaborate rituals (the Communist Party and its congresses); there is a cosmic mythology of fall and redemption (historical materialism, which teaches a fall from original bliss in primitive society through the invention of property, then a gradual ascent through the various types of societies, and finally the ultimate redemption of all in the paradise of communism). If we ignore the rejection of belief in the supernatural, communism fulfills most of the criteria we would intuitively apply to a religion and could justifiably be considered a materialist quasi-religion.[1]

Christmas gifts. This is where things start to get murky. On the one hand, Christmas is originally a Christian festival (although it may have borrowed some aspects from ancient Roman and Germanic festivals), and Christmas gifts are a Christian custom. But today, this formerly religious ritual has lost its religious character completely. And unlike Sunday closures, celebrating Christmas is a practice that has become widespread in non-Christian societies. So, are Christmas gifts perhaps just the secular remnant of a formerly religious phenomenon?

Headscarves. This might be the most controversial example of the whole list. The Muslim headscarf is seen by some as a religious symbol, by others merely as an expression of a certain cultural affiliation, while still others interpret it as a political statement in a culture war. The boundaries of religion, culture, and

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1   See Smart 1989: 25 f.

identity become blurred here, with what actually constitutes religion proving an urgent question in sociopolitical or even legal contexts.

1.1 Different Concepts of Religion

As these examples show, it's not too difficult to push our intuitive understanding of the term 'religion' to its limits. This is where philosophy comes in: one of its most important tasks is to clarify what our words actually mean. Thus, when we ask, 'What is religion?' it's best to understand this question as, 'What do we actually mean when we speak of 'religion'?' So, what we're looking for now is a *definition* of religion.

The problem is that there is no universally accepted definition of religion (at least in this respect, scholars of religious studies agree). James Leuba, an early psychologist of religion, famously gave a list of no less than 48 different definitions of religion, and this was just at the beginning of the 20th century. Unsurprisingly, he rejected all of them and proceeded to add his own.[2] Since then, the number of available definitions of religion has hardly decreased. It can sometimes be useful to look at the etymological origins of a word to get a better understanding of the concept behind it. But in this case, not much is gained, because the etymology of 'religion' itself is not clear. The English word 'religion' (and its cognates in other Western languages) is derived from the Latin *religio*. The Roman writer Cicero (106–43) already explained that this term has its root in *relegere,* which means 'to pay careful attention to (something)' (the opposite of *neglegere*: to neglect or overlook, not pay attention to [something]). Understood this way, religion primarily consists in the careful observance of ritual propriety in worshipping the gods and fulfilling their will. For Cicero then, religion is fundamentally about right action, not right belief: religion is conscious, correct behavior toward the gods.[3] But already in late antiquity, the Christian theologian Lactantius (c. 250–325) suggests an alternative explanation, deriving *religio* from *religare*, which means 'to bind again.' The idea here is that the soul, which is separated from God, must be bound to him once again through faith.[4] So it's not at all clear what the original meaning of the term is. And even if we were to find a convincing answer on the etymological front, this still wouldn't help us, as we would then know only what the ancient Romans meant by *religio*: there is no reason to assume that our word 'religion' must mean the same thing just because it's historically related to this Latin word. On the contrary, the word 'religion' has undergone significant changes in meaning over the centuries.

While *religio* originally denotes the correct practice of worshipping the gods, in late antiquity it takes on the meaning of 'true belief in God' (particularly in Christian usage). This is roughly what the Roman philosopher Augustine means (354–430), when he titles one of his writings *De vera religione* (On True Religion). He's

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2 Leuba 1912: 339–361.
3 See *De natura deorum* II, 72. This etymology is supported by the fact that the word 'religio' also occurs in a similar meaning in completely non-religious contexts, where it simply means 'concerns' or 'reconsideration,' e.g., in Livius, *Ab urbe condita* VIII, 3.
4 *Institutiones divinae* IV, 28.

not referring to the one true religion in contrast to the many false ones, since at that time there was the idea neither that there is a plurality of religions nor that there could be a false *religio*; rather, he is giving an account of what true faith in God actually consists in. In the Middle Ages, *religio* comes to refer to the correct way of life that results from this faith, namely the monastic one – *religiosi* are thus monks and nuns. It was not until the Reformation and the beginning of the modern era that the term 'religion' gradually began to take on the meaning it has for us today, becoming associated more strongly with personal faith and also gaining a plural form: there is no longer simply religion, but *religions*, which can be divided into true ones and false ones. We don't really find a unified, abstract concept of religion (one that can be understood as an umbrella term for all existing manifestations of religion) before the Enlightenment. This development of the concept is completed with the idea of a *natural religion*, i.e., a religion that is not based on revelation but is completely derived from reason.

The concept of religion is clearly a product of European thought, then, and its development can't be separated from the specific historical and cultural conditions under which it evolved in the (Christian) West. This becomes a problem once we try to apply the term beyond the limits of its original context. On the one hand, it's inseparably connected with this particular context, but on the other hand, we usually have no trouble speaking of non-Western religions. Clearly, when we speak of 'religion *per se*' and of 'religions' in the plural, we are already assuming that there is a common characteristic that allows us to subsume all these different phenomena under a single general term. Similarly, we also speak of 'humans *per se*' and 'humans in different places and cultures,' even though individual human beings vary remarkably with respect to their physical appearance, cultural identity, or gender. This is what concepts are for: a concept subsumes a multitude of different individual things under a common category. So, shouldn't we expect there to be religions and a counterpart to the Western concept of religion in other, non-Western cultures, too?

The truth is more complicated. Not even in all parts of Western culture itself do we find clear equivalents for the modern concept of religion. For example, in ancient Greece – arguably one of the paradigmatic cultures of the West – there was no expression that could serve as an exact translation of 'religion.' One possible candidate is the term *eusébeia,* which denotes reverence or holy awe of the gods – that is, a certain attitude or feeling. This attitude need not be specifically religious, though, since one can also feel *eusébeia* toward one's parents or other persons of respect. Another would be *threskeía*, which refers to a specific kind of action, namely the ritual worship of a deity. But this term only captures the ritual aspect of religion. Finally, *latreía,* service, could be a possible equivalent. But this term refers not only to service to the deity as it's performed by the priestesses and priests, but to every kind of service, including the everyday sense of 'a service performed in exchange for payment.' In Christian times, *pístis*, faith, is added (which played no role in the original Greek religion). None of these expressions captures exactly what is meant by our modern concept of religion. Instead, each picks out a particular aspect of it, but at the same time overlaps with

non-religious meanings, leading one to suspect that in ancient Greece, religion was not perceived as a distinct phenomenon which could be separated from the rest of culture.

Similar difficulties arise when we move further away from the West and look for an equivalent concept in Indian culture. One obvious candidate is *dharma,* which is used in modern India as a translation for the Western term 'religion.' In Hindu schools of thought and in Buddhism, however, *dharma* refers to the fundamental principle or ultimate nature of reality (in Buddhism, the metaphysical elements of reality are also called *dharmas,* plural). So, when Buddhists refer to their religion as the *dharma,* they are indicating that the teaching of the Buddha is not a dogma or a creed, but simply a factual description of reality. In this context, one can't really speak of different *dharmas* (in the sense of different religions), because there is only one reality and therefore only one correct description of it, namely the one, eternal *dharma* laid out by the Buddha. In contrast to this eternal truth, the concrete, historically developed form of Buddhist religion is called *sāsana,* although this term again is only applied to the teaching of the Buddha and is not a universal concept of religion. In the Hindu context, meanwhile, the term *darsana* is another alternative. *Darsanas* are the various religious-philosophical schools and currents within and outside Hinduism (e.g., the Hindu schools of Vedanta and Nyaya, but also Jainism and Buddhism). But this term doesn't match our concept of religion either, because it encompasses different doctrinal traditions without distinguishing between religious and non-religious types. Its closest counterpart in English would be the concept of *philosophy* (in the sense of the philosophy of a particular school, e.g. the philosophy/*darsana* of the Stoics). As in ancient Greece, it seems there is no exact equivalent of our modern concept of religion in Indian thought.

As a final example, let's consider Chinese culture. Modern Chinese does have an expression for religion (*zōngjiào*). But this term is a neologism formed in the 19th century, derived from Japanese and coined specifically as a translation for the Western concept of religion, because classical Chinese, as you might have guessed, had no expression that denotes religion. Understood literally, *zōngjiào* refers to ancestor worship, emphasizing – like the Latin *religio* – the practical side of religion. In classical Chinese, there are a number of words that could serve as possible translations of 'religion.' First, there is the word *jì,* meaning the ritual sacrifices to gods, spirits, and deceased ancestors; but again, this term captures only the practical side of religion. Related to this is the concept of *lǐ,* which originally also means ritual, but also refers to the mindset and attitude appropriate to ritual, that is, to formal, moral, or polite behavior (in modern Chinese, *lǐ* is primarily associated with politeness). Under the influence of Confucianism, however, the concept of *lǐ* quickly loses its religious roots and soon comes to denote ethical behavior in general, without religious connotations. Another alternative is the term *dào.* This complex term, which literally means 'way,' denotes a cosmic principle underlying the permanent changes in physical reality (which is why the cosmos is in constant flux). What's more, it's also the nature of a person or being, so that full realizing this *dào* is something each of us should aim for. In this sense,

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a person is said to have the *dào* when they live in harmony with their original na-ture. However, *dào* is also the way of life a particular person teaches, or simply their teaching. For example, Confucius speaks of his *dào* when referring to his philosophy. Confucian religion, then, would be the *dào* of Confucius; the meaning of the term *dào*, though, is clearly much broader than that of 'religion,' referring as it does to any kind of teaching. Alternatively, there are the terms *jiào* and *jiā*, which mean someone's teaching and their school, and which capture the social as-pect of religion. Confucianism, then, is the *jiào* (i.e., the doctrine) or the *jiā* (i.e., the community built upon it) of Confucius. But again, these are not specifically religious terms; either can also be used in completely secular ways.

Now, if there are no equivalents for the concept of religion in non-Western cultures, does this mean that the concept is a product of European intellectual history and can therefore only apply in a European or Western context? Is there actually no 'religion' outside the West? Do we distort the true nature of these other cultural phenomena by imposing a concept on them that these cultures themselves never developed? I don't think we need to go this far. For one thing, that a concept was originally limited to one particular context doesn't mean that it can only ever be meaningfully applied in that same context. The concept of democracy is a product of Western thought, too, but that doesn't mean that democracy couldn't exist outside the West. Moreover, the absence of a term doesn't imply the absence of the thing it denotes. It's hard to find an equivalent to the English word 'awkward' in other languages – but of course, there are awk-ward people and situations in non-English speaking countries, too. Likewise, the question isn't ultimately whether there is an expression equivalent to 'religion,' but whether we can, in other cultural contexts, identify the phenomenon to which it refers. And the answer is that we can. It's not as if there is nothing even remote-ly resembling the phenomenon of religion in non-Western cultures. All the terms we have mentioned show some significant overlap with certain aspects of the concept of religion even if they don't overlap with it completely. The phenomenon is carved up differently, so to speak, but most of the elements of the modern concept of religion can still be identified elsewhere, even if they are not subsumed under the same umbrella term. If the category of religion really had no referent outside the West, then we would find not same these elements, but rather nothing at all.

1.2 Defining Religion

But again, what do we mean by 'religion?' So far, we have only established that the concept of religion has a complex history and that it has no exact equivalents outside Western culture, although the phenomenon it refers to appears to be universal. But what phenomenon are we actually talking about? Obviously, to answer this question, we need a definition of religion. But before looking at some possible candidates, we should be clear about what it's we expect from such a definition. First of all, a definition should explain the *meaning* of a term. This can be done in a number of ways. On the one hand, we can define a term by listing the essential characteristics of its referent. That is, we look for the

essential characteristics common to all objects within the term's scope. This type of definition we might call a *descriptive* definition. Alternatively, we can begin by fixing a meaning for the term we want to define and then proceed to check which objects actually fall within its scope. That is, instead of starting from the objects and looking for a common characteristic, we begin with a definition that first determines the scope of the term and only then decide which objects it applies to. Call this kind of definition a *normative* definition.[5] Borrowing some concepts from philosophy of language, we could say that in the descriptive case the extension (the set of all things that fall under the term) determines the intension (the meaning), while in the normative case it's the other way around: intension determines extension. The choice between these two approaches to definitions becomes relevant when we are confronted with cases that are ambiguous given our preliminary, intuitive understanding of the term. For example, we might wonder whether Indianapolis is a big city. Obviously, the answer depends on how we define a big city. On a descriptive definition, we should take clear cases of big cities and look for the characteristics they have in common, and then check whether Indianapolis also has these characteristics (which could be a number of things, such as a certain population size, skyscrapers, nationally or internationally significant institutions, etc.). On a normative definition, on the other hand, we could say that all cities with a population above, say, 300,000 are big cities. Then, of course, Indianapolis is a big city. For a descriptive definition, dealing with borderline cases is a crucial problem: do we need to revise the definition to accommodate them, or do we have to revise our preliminary understanding of the term? Normative definitions don't have this problem, but they run the risk of ignoring our preliminary intuitions (for example, according to the normative definition of 'big city,' Newark, Stockton, and Greensboro are big cities – not necessarily places that one would immediately associate with this term). As we will see, for many definitions of religion it's not clear whether they are intended to be normative or descriptive definitions. In fact, it's not even clear whether religion should be defined normatively or descriptively in the first place.

Second, we should also expect a definition to be adequate, that is, to capture its subject matter correctly. In other words, the *definiendum* (the concept to be defined) and the *definiens* (that by which it's defined) should be co-extensional, i.e., everything that falls under the definition must also fall under the concept and vice versa. For example, an even number is defined adequately as a number divisible by two with no remainder; hence, any number divisible by two with no remainder must be even and vice versa. A definition is adequate if we can state one or more conditions (or criteria) that are both necessary and, taken together, sufficient for the object we are trying to define. 'Necessary' means that if something counts as this kind of object, then it must also satisfy the criterion. For example, having children is a necessary condition for being a mother: a definition of 'mother' must contain the criterion 'someone who has children.' But this is

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5 There are some terminological subtleties here which we don't need to go into. The distinction between *descriptive* and *normative* roughly corresponds to that between *real* and *nominal* definition, and instead of normative definition some also speak of *stipulative* definition.

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not a sufficient condition – someone who has children could also be a father. 'Sufficient' means that if the criterion is satisfied, then the object in question will fall under the term. For example, being eighteen years old is a sufficient condition for being an adult (if you are eighteen years old, then you are an adult); but it's not a necessary condition, because you could also be nineteen, forty-two, or ninety-seven and still be an adult. Accordingly, an adequate definition of religion must be such that everything that is a religion also satisfies the criteria mentioned in the definition; and, conversely, everything that satisfies these criteria must be a religion. As we will see, most definitions have trouble with at least one of these two requirements.

Definitions of religion can be divided broadly into two types: *essentialist* (or substantialist) and *functionalist* theories. Essentialist theories try to find a common essence of religion, while functionalist theories define religion through the function it fulfils for the individual or for a society. Thus, while essentialist theories ask what religion *is*, functionalist theories ask what religion *does*. Let's take a closer look at these two approaches before we go on to discuss a third alternative, one that understands religion as an open concept and tries to go without a definition for it in the usual sense.

(a) Essentialist theories

Essentialist theories assume that all religions share a common, essential quality that defines them. These theories are often found in phenomenology of religion, a school of thought which claims that religion is a universal, irreducible phenomenon in its own right, and that this universal essence of religion becomes apparent when we bracket the specific cultural and historical contexts of individual religions. This essence is frequently seen as belief in a God or gods, or other non-human, spiritual beings, for example by Günter Lanczkowski (1917–1993) and Geo Widengren (1907–1996), two prominent representatives of phenomenology of religion. Lanczkowski writes:

> Religion is an underivable primordial phenomenon, a *sui generis* element, which is constituted by the existential interrelation between the divine on the one hand, whose manifestations man experiences, and the reactions of man on the other, his 'direction towards the unconditioned', which is realized in veneration and adoration, in ethical living and ritual action, in following a path of salvation, which leads to redemption after being freed from suffering and sin. (Lanczkowski 1991: 23 f., my translation)

On this view, religion can't be reduced to psychological or evolutionary factors. Rather, religion by its very nature consists in the varieties of human encounters with manifestations of the divine. A religion which rejects all belief in something divine would thus be self-refuting. But, one might object, not all religions include a belief in something divine. Early Buddhism is frequently cited as a counterexample: while early Buddhism accepts the Indian pantheon of its time, it also regards these gods as subject to the law of the *dharma* and as no less mortal than anyone else; they, too, are subject to rebirth. Moreover, early Buddhism

rejects the idea of a transcendent God as the ultimate creator or principle of the world. It follows, then, that belief in God is not a necessary criterion for religion. Lanczkowski accepts this objection and concludes that contrary to our intuitions, early Buddhism is not a religion after all (thus proposing a normative definition of religion). But if we accept this solution, then we run the risk of moving too far away from our preliminary intuitions about religion, because early Buddhism is not the only problematic case: in many of the myths of Indigenous religions in America or Oceania, we encounter higher powers or beings who are the creators of the universe, who lend their power to seers or shamans through whom they work, and who exist beyond the world in a realm inaccessible to the living (under normal circumstances). It seems rather unreasonable to equate these beings with God or gods; after all, one important aspect of the concept of God is that a God is a person, i.e., a being capable of rational thought and action with whom one can communicate (more on this in chap. 9.1). But that doesn't seem to apply to these beings. And even the gods of ancient Mediterranean polytheism (as well as their cognates in Hinduism or in pre-Christian Nordic religion) don't simply represent the plural of what is understood by 'God' in monotheistic religions. Of course, one could argue that all these different gods can be understood as different manifestations of the same general concept of divinity – but this is quite a strong claim that would need to be supported by sufficient evidence. And given the vast differences between these various religious ideas, this evidence might be hard to come by. Essentialist definitions which take belief in the divine as the defining feature of religion are thus empirically inadequate: on these definitions, some phenomena that we would normally think of as religions don't qualify for this designation anymore.

Another important essentialist definition comes from Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), who in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (published in German in 1917, English translation in 1923) maintains that an experience of the 'Holy' is the essence of religion (cf. chap. 4.1). The Holy, he claims, is not a particular religious object. Rather, it's a certain type of feeling or awareness that manifests itself in religious experiences. It's a sense of our own smallness, weakness, and dependence that arises in the face of something greater than us: 'the religious emotion would be directly and primarily a sort of *self*-consciousness, a feeling concerning one's self in a special, determined relation, viz. one's dependence.' (Otto 1923: 10) Otto refers to this experience as 'creature-feeling.' But it's not just a mere feeling; rather, it's a reaction to the perceived reality of the Holy, or the Numinous. For Otto, the Numinous is a name for whatever triggers this creature-feeling in someone. Hence, it doesn't describe one thing in particular, but must be understood purely phenomenologically, that is, it describes just how the Numinous affects you and how you experience it. Otto epitomizes the concept of the Numinous in his famous formula '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' – something mysterious which makes us shudder and tremble, but also fascinates and attracts us. It's mysterious insofar as it leaves us speechless, appears as something completely different, and eludes rational understanding; it makes us tremble because it's frightening, overpowering, and unpredictable; it fascinates us because it's wonderful and evokes feelings of love or gratitude in us. He claims that religions are essentially based

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on this unique kind of experience, not on belief in a God. Of course, in some religions the Numinous is experienced as a personal God. But this means only that the experience of the Holy is perceived as a reaction towards a divine entity. The experience of holiness is what makes this experience religious, not the fact that the object of this experience is a God. On the contrary, the Holy might be experienced in completely different ways.

One important advantage of Otto's approach is that his definition of religion can accommodate non-theistic religions, too, or religions with very different conceptions of the divine. But nevertheless, his theory also faces some objections which concern the concept of the Holy and its relation to the divine:

(a) Don't we already need to have a concept of religion *before* we can understand what the Holy is? After all, in which contexts do people have experiences of the Holy? Surely in those which we already accept as religious, e.g. during prayer or meditation, but not while shopping for groceries or filing your taxes. So, to identify the Holy, it seems we already need to have a rough understanding of what religion is (and what it's not). Otto's reply to this objection, though, is that it's pointless to talk about religion to someone who has never had such an experience of the Holy himself – just as it's pointless to explain heartbreak to someone who has never lost a loved one. He is not concerned with defining religion apart from any personal preconditions; rather, his intention is to analyze our intuitive understanding of the religious. But then again, this means that we still have not found a definition of religion.

(b) Proponents of the idea that belief in God is the essence of religion accuse Otto of putting the cart before the horse. Where, after all, does the idea of the Holy come from? Otto pretends that the idea is what comes first, and it's only afterwards that we attach it to a divine reality. But why do we experience holiness, if not because we feel that we are encountering something divine? Otto believes that the experience of the Holy comes first, and only then is God introduced as the source of holiness. But in reality, his critics argue, it's precisely the other way around: first there is a God, and it's only with reference to this God that the concept of holiness makes any sense.

(b) Functionalism

To avoid difficulties like these, we could try an alternative approach and give a functionalist definition of religion. A function, to put it simply, is what something does, or a certain role that something plays. What religion is, then, is not determined by some inherent characteristic of religion, but by the role religion plays for the individual or for society. For example, Sean Connery, Pierce Brosnan, and Daniel Craig are all James Bond – not because they all have a certain essential quality that makes them James Bond, but because they all happen to play that role. In principle, anyone, no matter who, might be James Bond, no matter what he or she is: being James Bond is nothing but fulfilling a certain function in a movie. But what is the unique role religion plays? Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), a pioneer of ethnological and religious studies in the 20th century, offers

a classical functionalist answer as part of his more general functionalist theory of culture. For Malinowski culture is an instrument used by humans to regulate their needs and to address problems that they encounter in their environment. Unlike animals, whose behavior is determined by their instincts, humans are biologically indeterminate. The function of culture is to compensate for this deficit. For example, the task of religion is to relieve humans of the burden of existential questions: 'Pragmatically, religion is necessary to the average individual to overcome the shattering disruptive anticipation of death, of disaster, and of destiny.' (Malinowski 1944: 202) Death and disaster pose existential threats to a society, and religions can avert these threats by providing a way to react to them. For example, the death of a loved one shatters the normal course of life and introduces fear, despair, or the desire to give up on everything. But religious mythologies and funeral rites absorb these negative emotions, thereby ensuring that the stability of society will continue. For Malinowski, religion has an integrating or harmonizing function: it ensures that the other elements of culture can continue to exist safe from the potential threat of destabilizing reactions to tragic events.

Similarly, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) defines religion by reference to its function in society.[6] For Luhmann, religion's central task is to help us cope with our own contingency. By contingency he means the fact that things could be different than they are: the time and place of your birth, your job, and even your gender are contingencies, each with an almost infinite number of possible alternatives. Religion reduces the number of alternative possibilities by declaring some of them necessary, thereby creating meaning and orientation – not for the individual, however, but for society as a system. Religion generates meaning by reducing the complexity of the world in such a way that society as a system can meaningfully engage with its surroundings. For the individual, conversely, religion is not a necessity.

Unfortunately, functionalist theories also face some serious objections.

(a) Just like essentialist theories, functionalism doesn't appear to be empirically adequate. After all, there are plenty of cases in which religion not only fails to create stability, but in fact has the exact opposite effect – holy wars and terrorism, for instance. Malinowski might reply that his approach emerged from studying indigenous peoples, for whom religion and culture are closely intertwined and who don't have a plurality of religions as most modern societies. But if this is true, then his definition of religion can't be generalized, since it's not applicable to cases that differ significantly from the ones he studied. Thus, it isn't a viable definition in the end.

(b) Functionalist theories seem to assume that the ideal for a culture or society is for all its parts to be integrated as harmoniously as possible into a functional whole. This might make sense for indigenous societies, but hardly for modern, Western ones. What would it even mean for a modern society to be a 'functional

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6   See Luhmann 1984.

whole?' And what would the criterion be for judging a given society to be sufficiently functional or not?

(c) Lastly, the functionalist definition seems to be simply too broad. There are many other conceivable means of stabilizing societies or dealing with the contingencies of our existence besides religion – for instance, national identity, non-religious ideologies, sports and hobbies, art, family structures, local communities, television, or social media. Thus, while essentialist approaches apparently fail to provide a *necessary* condition for religion, it looks as if functionalist approaches fail to provide a *sufficient* condition, as their definition applies to more than just religion.

(c) Religion without Definition

So neither approach seems to give us an acceptable definition of religion. But is this really a problem? Can we still understand what religion is even if we lack a precise definition? Yes, we can. There are plenty of other terms we use in everyday life that can't be defined precisely either. For example, everyone knows what 'fruit' means, but is there a definition of 'fruit?' In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) confronts a similar problem when he introduces the concept of a language game in an attempt to explain what language is. A fictional critic then objects that one can't talk about language games without first clarifying what a game is: what is the one defining feature all games have in common? Wittgenstein rejects this objection on the grounds that there is no such feature:

> Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear. (Wittgenstein 1958: § 66)

There is no single feature that all these games have in common, but still there is a *family resemblance* (as Wittgenstein calls it) among them. Games resemble each other, just as members of a family may resemble each other in many aspects (hair color, face shape, or character), but with the exact points of similarity varying from member to member. A concept based on a family resemblance is fuzzy: it has no clear boundaries and can't be defined precisely; rather, it can only be conveyed by examples. In the same way, you could explain what fruit's not by giving a definition of fruit, but by giving examples: apples, strawberries, pineapples, lemons, *and things like that* are fruit. If we were to extend this model to religion, then, we would first look at some examples of religions and then identify the similarities between them, thereby gradually narrowing the scope of our concept.

To be sure, a concept like this will always be to some extent vague, so that there will always be borderline cases where it's not clear whether the concept applies (e.g., is rhubarb a fruit?). Consequently, we have to accept that questions like 'Is Confucianism a religion?' will have no clear answer because the term 'religion' itself is not precise enough. But this doesn't prevent us from actually using it in a meaningful way. After all, says Wittgenstein, we have no trouble understanding what we mean when someone says: 'Stand roughly there', even though we can't specify the exact spot where 'there' begins and where it ends (Wittgenstein 1958: § 71).

In a similar vein, Jacques Waardenburg (1930–2015), a scholar of religious studies, argues that we should give up trying to find a precise definition of religion, and instead start understanding the term as an 'open concept' (Waardenburg 1992). This means highlighting certain elements that we find to varying degrees in different religions, without declaring any of them essential. The more of these features are present, and the more pronounced they are, the more willing we will be to call something a religion. Waardenburg himself identifies three main features: a religious interpretation of reality, religiously interpreted experiences, and religiously interpreted norms. Ninian Smart (1927–2001), a British theorist of religion, goes farther and lists a total of six dimensions of religion:[7]

a ritual dimension	an ethical dimension
a mythological dimension	a social dimension
a dogmatic dimension	an experiential dimension

On this view, religions are complex, multifaceted phenomena that can't be reduced to a single essential characteristic. Instead, the concept of religion includes various features, none of which, in themselves, are any more or less important than the others. Some of us might emphasize the cognitive aspect, i.e., the religious doctrines and dogmas, while others will focus on the ethical and ritual side of religion. But this is a deliberate choice depending on our prior understanding of the term 'religion' and on our research agenda. The question of what we actually mean when we speak of religion can only be answered by citing examples and explaining what strikes us as particularly important about those examples. At the end of the day, the best we can do to define religion is to say: 'By religion, I mean *something like this*.'

1.3 Philosophy of Religion

We now have a better understanding of what the term 'religion' means. One question still remains, though: what is *philosophy* of religion? What are its tasks, aims, and methods? Philosophy of religion is not the only discipline that deals with religion: theology and religious studies are concerned with religion, too, and we must distinguish them from a specifically philosophical approach to religion. In contrast to philosophy of religion, 'religious studies' refers to a variety of disciplines in the empirical and social sciences that deal with the study of

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7 Smart 1996.

religious phenomena, such as the psychology, sociology, or history of religion. A crucial characteristic of these disciplines is that they take an external approach to religion: religious studies scholars don't interpret religion from the inside, but rather from a viewpoint of scientific objectivity. The aim of religious studies is to analyze, catalogue, and interpret religious phenomena objectively. Consequently, the question whether religious beliefs are actually true is bracketed in religious studies. This doesn't mean that an individual scholar can't in fact be a follower of a certain religion and subscribe to its beliefs. It only means that this personal belief is not part of her scientific perspective. Theology, on the other hand, has the task of presenting, analyzing, and systematically unfolding a particular religion from its own perspective. Theology in this sense is a religion's systematic self-reflection. Thus, we should not limit the term 'theology' to theistic religions – even though it literally means 'science of God.' If we understand theology as the attempt to develop a systematic account of one's own religion, then there will also be a Buddhist theology, that is, a self-interpretation and analysis of Buddhism according to how it understands itself. In contrast to religious studies, theology is not neutral regarding the question of truth. For theology, the question of truth is not bracketed, but given a forthright answer: indeed, the truth of the religious beliefs under discussion is (to some extent) presupposed. Theology can, of course, adopt a critical distance to traditional doctrines, but it necessarily presupposes the standpoint of the religion which it reflects. Systematically analyzing and reflecting on Christianity from a Christian perspective is Christian theology; analyzing the same Christianity from an objective, neutral perspective is history of religion.

Philosophy of religion stands between these two. Like religious studies, it takes an external perspective and is not committed to any particular religious perspective. Philosophy of religion analyzes and reflects on the phenomenon of religion itself, the dogmas and ideas of individual religions, without being bound to one of them. Like theology, though, it's not neutral regarding the question of truth. Philosophy of religion has a fundamental *interest* in answering this question, but unlike theology, it presupposes neither the truth nor the falsity of any religious beliefs. Philosophy of religion therefore has two central tasks:

(a) Clarifying religious *concepts*. What is God? What is a soul? What is *karma*? What is *dào*? Questions like these are typical for philosophy of religion. The task of philosophy of religion, then, is to analyze the meaning of the concepts we find in the religious traditions of the world. Note that while we must start from the sources and ideas of some particular tradition, the goal of philosophy of religion should be to translate these concepts into a language that can be understood independently of that tradition. For example, it's important to stick to Indian philosophy itself if one wants to understand what *brahman* is, but the result of this philosophical analysis should then be understandable to any rational person (at least if one is willing to make the effort) regardless of whether they know Sanskrit or are culturally Hindu. This distinguishes the philosophical approach from that of both theology and religious studies, both of which start from the way a religion understands itself. Philosophers of religion may in turn interpret aspects of a religion through concepts that are foreign to it, bringing them to bear

on it through philosophical inquiry. Thus, an important aspect of this first task of philosophy of religion is to develop a theory of how religious language and religious experience should properly be understood.

(b) The *justification* of religious beliefs. Religions have cognitive contents, that is, they have a certain worldview and hold certain things about reality to be true. Religious persons therefore have certain beliefs about reality – for example, that there is a God who created the world, that Mohammed is God's prophet, or that the soul is separated from the body at death and is reincarnated. Some of these beliefs are made explicit, for example, in Christian creeds or in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Others are only held implicitly and manifest themselves in rituals or ethical precepts, and we need to attribute these beliefs to the religious person in order to interpret their behavior. For example, the belief that the dead live on in the afterlife may be expressed by the practice of putting everyday items in the grave with them. The task of philosophy of religion is to evaluate these religious beliefs epistemically – are they true? What reasons are there to justify them? To do so, we first need to understand what these beliefs mean and clarify the concepts that are used to express them (like God, soul etc.). Then, we can start looking for arguments which might support or refute these beliefs. Accordingly, philosophy of religion can be practiced either apologetically or critically. An apologetic philosophy of religion will aim at defending the truth of certain religious beliefs, while a critical philosophy of religion will attempt to refute them. The bread and butter of philosophy of religion is engaging with religious beliefs – that is, rationally and critically examining arguments for and against particular religious beliefs. Of course, what this examination should look like depends on what rationality means. Thus, a central part of this second task is to clarify what we mean by 'rationality' (not just with regard to religion, but in general) and how rationality relates to religion.

Sources

Otto 1923: chaps. 1–7 explore the idea of the Holy as the core of religion. Kunin 2006 provides a selection of classic and contemporary texts on the notorious question 'What is religion?'. On vague terms and family resemblances, see Wittgenstein 1958: §§ 65–71.

Further Reading

Religion and religious studies in general: Markham 2001. McCutcheon 2019. Defining religion: Stausberg/Gardiner 2016. Clarke/Byrne 1993. Schilbrack 2014: chaps. 4–5. Bielo 2015: chap. 1. Pals 2015. Difficulties with the concept of religion: Spiro 1966. Fitzgerald 1997. Against the concept of Religion: Webb 2009. Non-Western Philosophy of Religion: Harrison 2022.

Discussion Questions

- Is atheism a religion?
- What dimensions of religion are revealed in football?
- Could anything else come into question as the essence of religion other than God or the Holy?

Index of Subjects

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