
What *Isn't* Religion?*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This article is motivated by the sense that the category of religion has become sprawling, overly inclusive, and unwieldy. This problem is partly because the multiple definitions of religion in play today are so various and divergent, but it is also because some of those definitions are so capacious that the term "religion" loses its analytic usefulness. The study of religions will be helped, I judge, by a principled recommendation about what to exclude from the category.

Because the promiscuity of what I will call "pure functional" definitions of religion is central to my case, it may be worth providing a sense of the frustration of those who oppose them. In an extremely influential paper written half a century ago, Melford Spiro complains that with "[pure] functional definitions of religion . . . it is virtually impossible to set any substantive boundary to religion and, thus, to distinguish it from other sociocultural phenomena. Social solidarity, anxiety reduction, confidence in unpredictable situations, and the like, are functions which may be served by any or all cultural phenomena—Communism and Catholicism, monotheism and monogamy, images and imperialism—and unless religion is defined substantively, it would be impossible to delineate its boundaries."¹ More recently, Timothy Fitzgerald complains that, given a pure functional definition of religion, "one finds in the published work of scholars working within religion departments the term 'religion' being used to refer to such diverse institutions as totems . . . Christmas cakes, nature, the value of hierarchy, vegetarianism, witchcraft, veneration of the Emperor, the Rights of man, supernatural technology possession, amulets, charms, the tea ceremony, ethics, ritual in general, The Imperial Rescript of Education, the motor show, salvation, Marxism, Maoism, Freudianism, marriage, gift exchange, and so on. There is not

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¹ Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), 89–90.

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much within culture which cannot be included as ‘religion.’”² And Martin Reischbrodt continues, saying that pure functional definitions dilute the concept of religion “to the point of futility, considering barbecues with guitar music, soccer games, shopping in supermarkets, or art exhibitions to be religious phenomena. Everything becomes ‘somehow’ or ‘implicitly’ religious. Others criticize the concept of religion as an invention of Western modernity that should not be applied to premodern or non-Western societies. In their opinion, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are Western inventions that cannot be termed religions without perpetuating colonialist thinking. When soccer games are seen as religious phenomena and the recitation of Buddhist sutras is not, something has obviously gone wrong.”³ I agree with this complaint. Not every certainty should be called a dogma. Not every falsehood should be called a myth. The study of religions will be best served by a definition of religion that is more precise.

II. STRATEGIES FOR DEFINING RELIGION

Despite social constructionist arguments about the invention of the concept of religion, one can legitimately use the term “religions” to refer to certain kinds of social patterns that exist in the world.⁴ The next question is how best to understand the character of those social patterns. How should we define “religion”? It is important to note at the outset that one implication of the social constructionist position is that any definition of religion will have to be what I will call a *strategy*. By this I mean that one cannot define the word “religion” simply by looking at that to which the word allegedly refers. Since the very existence of religion depends on historically emergent concepts and since the reality of religion is itself a social construction, what religion is depends upon social recognition. The concepts of those who observe religion (whether practitioners or not) are therefore entangled, Schrödinger-style, in the nature of their object. As a consequence, what one decides is the “best” or the “right” definition of religion will depend on and be indexed to one’s purposes. The criterion of a good definition is therefore its practical value. In other words, to call a definition of religion a strategy is to agree with the sociologist Peter Berger’s statement that “definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either ‘true’ or ‘false,’ but only more useful or less so.”⁵

² Timothy Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997): 92–93; cf. 105.

³ Martin Reischbrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*, trans. Steven Rendall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xi; cf. 73.

⁴ For a supporting argument, see Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (December 2010): 1112–38.

⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 175. For a nice discussion of this point, see Craig Martin, *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere* (London: Equinox, 2010), chap. 1. As Spiro

The definition that I will propose, therefore, is not offered as a discovery of the sole truth about religion, but as a heuristic tool that lets us see religious studies as a field that permits a plurality of interpretive, explanatory, and evaluative projects with their divergent foci and methods. Toward that end, I outline a particular kind of functional definition that I call promissory and a particular kind of substantive definition that I call superempirical, and I then propose that the most useful definition for the study of religions will be an intersection of both. To be sure, some have suggested that the study of religion is now so diverse and fragmented that we can no longer expect theorists to have a common purpose, and so we cannot expect them to agree on a definition of religion.⁶ Although I recognize (and in fact insist on) a variety of purposes in the study of religions, I remain hopeful that students of religion can see themselves as sharing a common purpose or set of purposes to the extent that they might agree on the utility of a given definition. Indeed, I hope that they see greater utility in mine.⁷

So what is the best way to define religion for the practice of study of religion across cultures? Most of the answers to this question can be divided into two opposed strategies.

On the one hand, functionalist strategies seek to define certain beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities as religious in terms of what such phenomena do for the participants. These functional—or, as I will also call them, pragmatic—definitions of religion identify cultural phenomena as religious when they address a certain problem or need that is defined as distinctive of religious phenomena. On functionalist-pragmatist approaches, religion is, for example, what unifies a people, integrates an individual's

puts it, a definition of religion is properly a “nominal” definition and not a “real” definition (see n. 1). In agreeing with Berger, Martin, and Spiro, I am disagreeing with, for example, Émile Durkheim when he says that “it is not our preconceptions, passions, or habits that must be consulted for the elements of the definition we need; definition is to be sought from reality itself” (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields [New York: Free Press, 1995], 22). For examples of how scholars' findings about religion turn on their definitions of what religion is, see James Donovan, “Defining Religion,” in *Selected Readings in the Anthropology of Religion: Theoretical and Methodological Essays*, ed. Stephen D. Glazier and Charles A. Flowerday (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

⁶ According to J. Milton Yinger, “In dealing with a subject so complex and concerned with a range of data so broad as religion, a topic approached for many different purposes, one must give up the idea that there is *one* definition that is ‘correct’ and satisfactory for all” (*Religion, Society, and the Individual* [New York: Macmillan, 1957], 6). Gary Lease argues similarly in “The Definition of Religion: An Analytical or Hermeneutical Task?” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 12 (2000): 287–93, esp. 287–88.

⁷ Although parts of this essay propose new ideas, my goal is not to revolutionize the field but rather to build upon what I consider to be the most promising approaches of the past and to present a bounded definition of religion that can resist both those who claim that there is no coherent way to distinguish religion from nonreligion and those who claim that the task of the scholar is solely to deconstruct or denaturalize concepts. I seek to practice the study of religion in a style that is reflexive without treating reflexivity as our final goal. This essay therefore offers what is, I judge, the account of what religion is and isn't that best enables scholars of religion to do constructive work.

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conscious will and unconscious drives, or provides guidance in the quest for life's meaning. The best-known and most popular functionalist definition of religion is that of Émile Durkheim and his followers, who identify beliefs and practices as religious when they unite those who adhere to them into a single community. On this account, the focus of a religion can be God, but it can also be one's nation or a sense of team spirit—whatever generates the sentiments that integrate a collective. When some concern brings people together and unites them as a moral community, the beliefs and practices related to that function would be religious, according to this strategy. The required marker of religion here is that the phenomena in question address that specific problem or need.

On the other hand, substantive strategies seek to define certain beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities as religious in terms of their focal object. These substantive—or, as I will also call them, ontological—definitions of religion identify cultural phenomena as religious when they refer to a certain content or reality that is defined as distinctive of religious phenomena. On substantive-ontological approaches, religion is an engagement with supernatural, spiritual, or superhuman realities. The best-known and most popular substantive definition of religion is that of Edward Tylor and his followers, who identify beliefs and practices as religious when they involve spiritual beings. If a person believes that there exist spiritual beings—such as God, bodhisattvas, or ancestral spirits—then, on this account, that would be a religious belief. If she prays to, or sacrifices to, or makes a pilgrimage to the birthplace of or marks her body in recognition of her submission to a superhuman being, then, on this account, these would be religious practices. The required marker of religion here is that the phenomena in question refer to some kind of spiritual being or beings.

Which of these two kinds of definition is better? As I suggested above, answering this question turns on one's purposes. My own purpose as a philosopher of religions is to reflect critically on religious beliefs and practices *across cultures*. Many argue that the best definition for the study of religions across cultures, philosophical or not, needs to be a functional one. This is because functional definitions are not burdened with the idea that, to qualify as a religion, cultural phenomena must include a belief in God or some other common reality—an idea that is said to be implausible, if not covertly imperialistic. Functionalist definitions are more flexible, and they permit one to study religions in whatever forms they take from one culture to another, and they permit one to recognize the emergence of new forms of religion. For these reasons, many think that the study of religion as a multicultural phenomenon needs a functional definition of religion so as not to assume that all religions understand their focal objects in the same way. A functional definition would let philosophy of religion proceed with an openness to religious diversity and without limitations on or presuppositions about the nature of the religious reality.

On the other hand, there are also serious critiques of functionalist approaches. The primary objection is that without the recognition of some religious object that might distinguish religion from other forms of culture, the functionalist approaches are so inclusive and so open-ended that the term “religion” loses its analytic value. With functionalist approaches, it is said, any social practice, no matter how secular—including sports, politics, business, music, and so on—can be considered religious. In comparison, substantive definitions let us sort religion from nonreligion, and one religion from another, in a more straightforward fashion: only when one’s beliefs, practices, and institutions involve God or some other spiritual being is one participating in a religion.

The proponents of these two strategies continue to seek to fine-tune their approaches, and debates about how best to define religion abound. In my judgment, there is something of a stalemate here. However, I think that the argument between functional and substantive definitions overlooks a third option.

Consider this. Many of the beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities that are called religious actually satisfy both kinds of definitions. The beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities of Islam, to take just one example, have served the sociological function of uniting a community, the psychological function of making helplessness tolerable, and the existential function of providing an answer to the meaning of life, and so Islam can meet those functionalist definitions of religion. Likewise, Islam involves one’s submission to a spiritual being, and so it can also meet that substantive definition of religion. For this reason, the beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities of Islam can qualify as religious under both sets of criteria. The same can be said of Jainism and Scientology and Yoruba religion and most of the cultural phenomena that are widely considered religious. This observation points to what we might visualize as a significant area of overlap between the two definitions, an area in which one can find cultural phenomena that are religious according to either strategy.

The two strategies differ, to be sure. They differ, in the first place, because each provides a different perspective on cultural phenomena, foregrounding certain features as definitive of religion rather than others. But in order to overcome the stalemate between them, it is also important to see that the two strategies also differ because they permit a theorist of religion to be, so to speak, a purist, in either a functionalist sense or a substantive sense. A purist about the functional approach to religion would be one who says: a religion is whatever functions in someone’s life in a religious way even if it does not include anything that is substantively religious. Given that approach, nationalism, Marxism, and secular humanism can be counted as religions. Let’s call this approach pure functionalism. Similarly, a purist about the substantive approach to religion would say: a religion is whatever involves a religious reality even if it does not function in a religious way. For

Functional

Substantive

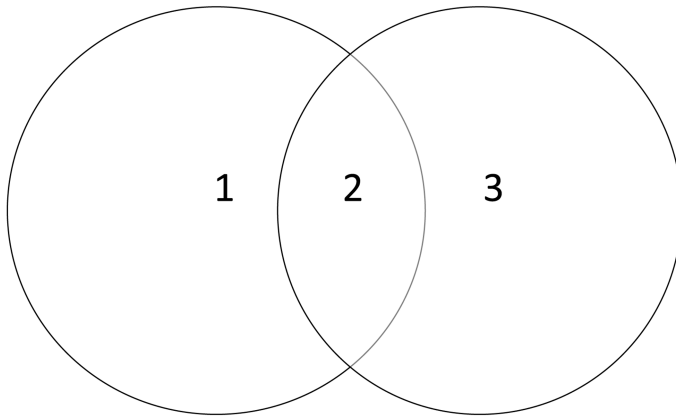


FIG. 1.—Functionalism, substantivism, and their overlap

example, this kind of purist would classify a person who believes that God exists as a religious person, even if he does not go to church, has not read the Bible, and does not gain comfort from the belief. On this purist view, the belief that God exists, even if it does not inform one's other beliefs and actions, is nevertheless a religious belief. And if a practice involves spiritual beings, it is a religious practice, even if the practice is not very important to the person and he is just going through the motions—thus, pure substantivism. The relation between the two strategies can be represented with a Venn diagram (see fig. 1).

When we look at this diagram, we can see that there are three regions: region 1 includes phenomena that are religious purely in terms of their function and not in terms of their content, region 3 includes phenomena that are religious purely in terms of their content and not in terms of their function, and the middle region 2 includes the phenomena that are both. Much of the heat in the debates about how best to define religion has been generated between the purists who endorse region 1 or region 3. In other words, much of the debate has been monothetic, in the sense that those who seek to develop a definition of religion have assumed that religion should be identified solely in terms of the substance of what is believed *or* the function of what is practiced. In region 2, however, are those cultural phenomena that meet both criteria: to be put into that region, the phenomena have to be both functionally and substantively religious. They have to involve both an ontological and a pragmatic commitment. The criteria that define region 2 are therefore double. Together they articulate what might be called a mixed or "dithetic" definition that identifies two features that are necessary for something to be recognized as a religion.

The possibility of region 2 and the coherence of a mixed definition are unsurprising, it seems to me, given the history of the word “religion.” As several scholars have noted, “religion” was not originally used as a generic concept. It was not used as what philosophers call a token of which there were many types. It was not used to categorize the variety of paths in different cultures but was used rather, among early Christians for example, to identify proper practice. For Augustine, “religion” meant “worship of God.”⁸ The phrase “worship of God” refers to what, according to the mixed definition I am recommending, would be (i) a religious object to which (ii) one responds in a religious way. Modern theorists of religion have then taken the form of this Augustinian understanding of the concept and pulled it apart. In effect, they have asked: Is it the religious object that is most important to the idea of the worship of God and which thereby makes the practice religious? Or is it the ways in which one responds to it? In this way, one can see that the substantive and functional strategies for defining religion are each the product of dissecting the Augustinian meaning of the term in one or the other direction, focusing on only one aspect of a concept that had had two. If a theorist judges that it is solely the object of worship that is essential to make a practice religious, then she develops a substantive definition that includes as religious not only those who dedicate themselves to God wholeheartedly but also those who practice in ways that are not central to the person’s life, not most important, and so on, or are even pointless or trivial, as long as they include that object. This produces a pure substantive definition. However, if a theorist judges that it is solely the depth with which that object is valued, the importance or ultimacy of one’s concern, then one develops a functionalist definition that counts as religious not only practices connected to God or Gods but also those that do not involve a superhuman reality at all, as long as they are pursued or held with sufficient enthusiasm or value. This produces a pure functionalist definition.

My proposal is that the most useful definition of religion will be one that refuses to pull apart the earlier, two-aspect, Augustinian understanding. The categories of substance and function should not be separated. They identify rather the two required aspects of that earlier prototypical use of the term. One aspect concerns *why* a belief is held and a practice done, the functional or pragmatic aspect of religion. The other aspect concerns *what*

⁸ I owe this point to Paul Griffiths (*Problems of Religious Diversity* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001], 2–3). He continues: “The equation of religion with worship was not unique to Augustine. It was almost standard in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world, and it became the ordinary understanding of *religio* among those Christians of late antiquity who wrote in Latin.” Augustine’s discussion of religion as “worship of God”—or, more fully, that “true religion means the worship of the one true God, that is, the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—is found in his *Of True Religion* (*Early Writings*, trans. John H. S. Burleigh [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953]). Given the lack of clarity about the meaning of the word “religion” today, it is worth noting that in his *Retractions*, Augustine notes that he himself was dealing with multiple etymologies for the term (in *Early Writings*, 221).

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the beliefs and practices are about, the substantive or ontological aspect of religion. If one does not insist on a pure functionalist or a pure substantive definition, then one can see that the two can overlap, in the sense that a belief or a practice or an institution can be both functionally religious (providing certain kinds of benefits) and also substantively religious (concerning certain kinds of realities).

To take this approach is to recognize that the concept of religion is a concept with a particular Western or European or Christian history. It is to see the definition of religion as having been stretched and enlarged from an earlier use, and it is to treat Christianity as a prototypical example of religion.⁹ Of course, this is not to accept Augustine's understanding of religion wholesale. On the contrary, I argue that the functionalist or pragmatic approaches capture an important aspect of religion, although Augustine's concept of "worship" is too narrow to be useful for cross-cultural or comparative study. And the substantive or ontological approaches capture the other important aspect, although Augustine's concept of God is similarly too narrow. Both aspects require stretching.

If one judges that a mixed or dithetic definition of religion deserves greater attention, then how best to understand each of the two required aspects? The next two sections seek to answer that question.

III. MAKING PROMISES: THE FUNCTIONAL OR PRAGMATIC ASPECT OF RELIGION

Functionalist or pragmatic approaches to religion focus on what people get out of participating in a religion, the benefit or consequences of religious belief, practice, and belonging. To argue that the best definition of religion will be, in part, a functional or pragmatic one, is therefore to judge that one should see religions as composed in the first place of actions that people do: what makes someone religious is that they worship, they live according to a divine law, they fast, they circumcise, they cultivate virtues, they go on pilgrimages, they meditate, and so on. Moreover, in the eyes of practitioners, such actions accomplish something. Religious people believe that religious actions help them. Religion solves problems. But which problems are the ones that define religious actions? What is the best way to understand the pragmatic aspect of religions?

⁹ This idea that the concept of *religion* operates prototypically has been developed and defended by anthropologist Benson Saler in *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, Unbounded Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), and cf. "Conceptualizing Religion: Some Recent Reflections" *Religion* 38 (2008): 219–25. Saler's understanding of the concept of religion is indebted to the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote, "A word has one or more nuclei of uses which come into everybody's mind first" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge, 1939* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976], 239–40).

Most of the traditional answers to this question have come from social scientists. For example, some functionalists sort religious beliefs, practices, and communities from nonreligious ones in terms of their psychological functions: on this approach, religious beliefs and practices are those that help one manage one's cognitive and emotional energies, that integrate one's identity, and that alleviate fear and renew one with courage. Other functionalists sort the religious from the nonreligious in terms of their social functions: on this approach, religious beliefs and practices are those that serve to generate bonding sentiments, that legitimate authority, and that create communal identity. In these functionalist definitions, however, the focus is typically on benefits of religious practice that are unconscious or latent. Religious practitioners themselves seldom practice because they consciously or explicitly seek to manage libidinal drives or legitimate authority. And though one can explain religious actions in terms that the practitioners do not know, one should not identify an action in terms that the practitioners themselves would not recognize.¹⁰ Rather, we should identify actions in terms of the conscious or manifest goals of the practitioners. It is to mark this point that I call this a pragmatic definition.¹¹

When one includes the manifest aims of religious practitioners, one gets a very broad range of religious goals.¹² Religious communities claim that participating in their practices offers a means to receive a variety of kinds of blessings and to ward off a variety of kinds of misfortune, in either this world or another. Thus, the rituals, prayers, talismans, and spiritual disciplines of religions are said to ensure propriety, healthy children, moral clarity, longevity, liberation, wealth, victory in war, salvation, peace of mind, and innumerable other benefits. For the sake of organization, one might sort the disparate benefits promised by religions into four domains: the body, social relations, nature, and existence as a whole. In the domain of the body, one finds religious practices designed to stave off death, to cure disease, to bring fertility, or to curse the welfare of one's enemies. In the domain of social relations, one finds religious practices designed to initiate children to adulthood, to marry, to elevate rulers, and to excommunicate. In the domain of nature, one finds religious practices designed to bring rain, to predict weather, and to ward off droughts, plagues, and other natural disasters. And finally, some religious communities promise that participation leads to overcoming all of life's problems, and they promise some form of existence without suffering or weakness or lack of any kind.

¹⁰ For this argument, see Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), esp. chap. 6.

¹¹ The good achieved in religious practices in some cases may be achieved simply by participating in the practice; in many cases, the benefit of participating is sometimes intrinsic to and not external to the practice. "Pragmatic" here does not necessarily mean instrumental.

¹² This paragraph draws on Reisebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*, though that book under-theorizes the concept of "salvation," which does not even appear in its index.

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When one includes the manifest goals of religious practice like these, one's definition makes practitioners' purposes central to one's definition. This is therefore a humanistic definition of religion, in the sense that it does not overlook the human agency or conscious aims of the religious communities studied. One might also be tempted to call it a therapeutic model of religions, because here one sees religions as typically composed of embodied social practices that seek to heal one's life as a whole but also to cure and protect the body, the community, and the natural world. On such a model, different religions offer different diagnoses of what ails people and then offer different regimens for remedies in either this world or another. Or if the therapeutic register is too positive and fails to capture the destructive purposes of religion, then one might more neutrally call this a promissory model of religions, because here one sees religions as composed of embodied social practices that promise benefits. Either way, to locate religion in terms of its pragmatic function is to define religion as offering to its members a normative path: religion is composed of practices that teach people how to act wisely, properly, or best. Religion is therefore here defined not simply as a set of beliefs about religious realities but also as a set of practices that promise right living. Some scholars of religions have spent a great deal of energy distinguishing between religious practices that teach one how to act properly in ethical senses (what to do if one's ox gores one's neighbor or how to cultivate filial piety), in ceremonial senses (what to do to honor the dead or to marry two people), and in magical senses (what to do to curse an enemy or to protect one's crops). But I do not separate these purposes; I am content to stop with the general point that religion, by definition, consists in normative social practices that are said to solve problems for people.

Although most functionalists are social scientists, defining religion in terms of its pragmatic function has also appealed to some philosophers of religion, and especially to those interested in making philosophy of religion cross-cultural. The function of religion on which philosophers typically focus is to provide an answer to the question of how one should live. Religion is then that which gives one's life orientation and meaning and thereby directs our wills and our appetites. Here are three examples. The classic example is that of Paul Tillich, who writes that "religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern." William Christian offers a definition that is a cousin to Tillich's: "Religion is interest in what is regarded as most important in the universe[, as] . . . that which matters most in the universe." And Paul Griffiths defines religion as "a form of life that seems to those who inhabit it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance." Griffiths unpacks this definition, saying that to call a form of life "comprehensive" is to say that it provides a prescriptive frame for all other forms of life to which one belongs, and that to call it "central" is to say that it addresses the questions of paramount

importance to the ordering of one's life. On such an account, the pragmatic function of religion, what makes beliefs or practices religious, is that they provide the standard that guides the rest of one's values.¹³

Philosophers of religion are sometimes guilty of seeing a religion merely as a set of beliefs, but to define religion functionally as these three philosophers do is to include much more. For Paul Tillich, following Heidegger's analysis of "care," to see religion as an existential "concern" is to see religion as an aspect of culture that involves the participation of the whole of the person. The religious function draws on the moral, cognitive, and aesthetic dimensions of the human personality.¹⁴ For William Christian, to see religion as a form of "interest" carries with it all the rich affective and conative dimensions that are implied in evaluative feeling, a feeling that is for Christians, here following Alfred North Whitehead, the basic way in which a subject relates to the world. And to see religion as a "form of life" for Paul Griffiths, picking up Wittgensteinian language, is to focus on the idea that a religion is a certain way of acting in the world and to highlight its inescapably social aspect. To define religion functionally in these Heideggerian, Whiteheadian, and Wittgensteinian ways is to belie the criticism that philosophy treats religion as merely propositions, that philosophy truncates religion to doctrines and makes it over in its own image as philosophy, or that philosophy assumes that religion is ahistorical or merely private. Like other functional definitions, these philosophical approaches focus on religions as patterns of desires, of emotional and volitional projects, of investment, and of living. Religion here involves people who develop projects with others over time, thereby creating individual and group identities. The philosophers therefore define religion not in terms of propositions, let alone in terms of reified systems of propositions, but rather in terms of attachment, of devotion and passion, of trust and hope.¹⁵

These philosophical definitions share the functional or pragmatic focus of the promissory model. This is because, like those who define religious practices in terms of their psychological, social, and therapeutic functions,

¹³ The three quotes, respectively, come from Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7–8; William Christian, "A Definition of Religion," *Review of Religion* 5, no. 4 (May 1941): 412, 413; and Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 7, 9, 11. Tillichian or axiological definitions of religion have not appealed only to philosophers: many sociologists and anthropologists have also adopted versions of them, including Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-industrial Japan* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957); William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1958), general introduction; and J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

¹⁵ For a nice discussion of the difference between a worldview merely as a set of beliefs and more richly as a set of things one cares about—or, as he likes to say, "gives a damn about"—see Peter A. French, *Cowboy Metaphysics: Ethics and Death in Westerns* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), chap. 1.

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these philosophers define religious practices in terms of solving a human problem. In fact, to define religion as providing an orientation for life, a center of value, a source of meaning, a comprehensive telos, or an image of personal or social perfection is to say that religions solve what might be called a metaproblem, namely: how to rank the relative values of the health of the body, one's social relationships, and the natural world. Religions often teach that certain pursuits should be subordinated to higher pursuits. One religious community might teach that family life is good but that sometimes family must be abandoned. Another might teach that the pleasures of food, sex, or a comfortable life are good but that there are conditions when they should be refused. If we call a community's teaching about how to rank the relative value of different goals its axiology, then these three functional definitions might be called axiological definitions of religion. Axiological definitions capture the fact that religions typically function to legislate comprehensive, all-inclusive paths, highest values, or ultimate norms. On these definitions, practices are religious then when they provide people with a comprehensive evaluative standard that tells one how to live.

Should we add the axiological functions of religion to the promissory model? That is, should we say that religions are those forms of life that function to address both (a) the problems of body, society, nature, and existence and (b) the metaproblem of how to rank one's purposes? One could combine these, because both reflect functionalist approaches and so both treat religions as pragmatic, problem-solving enterprises. Both agree that religion teaches a normative order. Nevertheless, I believe that we should recognize the axiological function as a typical feature of religions without treating it as a necessary part of the definition. Though some religious communities have connected their therapeutic practices to that which matters most in the universe or to a prescriptive frame for all other forms of life, not all have, and one can recognize religious practices without it. If we treat the axiological function as a typical but not definitive feature of religions, then we end up with a definition of religion that treats religion as a social practice that aims at solving problems—including problems that arise from the body, society, nature, and existence—and typically (but not necessarily or essentially) the metaproblems that arise when one seeks to rank one's ends.

This is, in my judgment, the right way to begin one's definition of religion: religions address a heterogeneous and open-ended variety of functions.¹⁶ This definition does not specify *the* religious function—or even the religious functions, in the plural. And this is good: the study of religions is best served by a definition that has an a posteriori approach to the study of what religious communities care about. Such a definition is very inclusive but is not vacuous, I judge, because it makes the point that religious beliefs,

¹⁶ For the seminal case that religions pursue disparate ends, see S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

practices, institutions, and communities always offer a normative path. What is thereby ruled out are accounts of religion as a set of propositions that are not practical or functional. Such a definition excludes, for example, the idea that religion is simply a set of beliefs independent of the roles they play in the life of a community. In other words, what is ruled out is the content of region 3.

But although I think that the right way to begin to define religion is to treat it as teaching a variety of normative practices, this cannot suffice as a definition of religion. It cannot suffice because *all* of culture is composed of normative practices. A culture simply *is* a normative order.¹⁷ To define religion as teaching proper behavior is not yet to distinguish it from other aspects of culture like medicine or sports or politics or art. Though it is valuable to frame religion as functional or pragmatic and not as, say, simply a product of theoretical speculation, it is not enough: to avoid the criticisms with which this article began, one still must specify which normative practices are the religious ones.

The three philosophers quoted above recognized this problem. They dealt with it by saying that religions are composed not of every practice, belief, community, or institution that is based on norms or values, but only those that are based on one's ultimate, most important, or comprehensive norms or values. They define religion in terms of what I called the axiological function. It is because they solve the problem in this way that all three of them are what I called "purely functional" in the sense that they do not require a religion to include any reference to God or spiritual beings or another other religious object. In fact, they explicitly reject the boundaries on what counts as a religion that would follow from defining religion in substantive terms: Tillich developed his definition precisely to include nationalism as a demonic religion; Griffiths says that a sport may be one's religion.¹⁸ It is because they solve the specification problem in this way that these philosophers usually give little attention to any religious promises other than the general one of giving orientation to life.

My solution to this specification problem is to accept a functional definition of religion but to move away from pure functional definitions like those three and to take the other (Augustinian or "mixed") option that specifies that religions are those normative practices that also refer to a religious reality. In other words, I move from region 1 to region 2. My primary reason

¹⁷ See Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a critical discussion of Smith that connects his moral account of human nature to evolutionary theory, see David Sloan Wilson, "Evolutionary Social Constructivism: Narrowing (but Not yet Bridging) the Gap: A Reflection on Christian Smith's *Moral Believing Animals*," *Global Spiral*, November 17, 2004.

¹⁸ William Christian defines religion in a purely functional way and is explicit about that choice, but he also recognizes the fact that leads to my mixed definition, namely, that religious people tend to ascribe reality to their ideal values ("A Definition of Religion," 413).

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for rejecting pure functionalism is that pure functionalists dilute the analytic value of the term to the point that they make empirical study of religion difficult. But another reason for combining the functionalist with the substantive approaches is to highlight a feature of religions that is of special interest to philosophy of religion, namely, that religious communities understand their practices and the values they teach as in accord with the nature of things. To this ontological issue I now turn.

IV. KEEPING PROMISES: THE SUBSTANTIVE OR ONTOLOGICAL ASPECT OF RELIGION

I am now ready to complete my argument that we should define religion dithetically not only as a form of culture that seeks functional and pragmatic benefits, but also one that refers to a certain distinctive reality or aspect of reality. My insistence that to be religious a practice, belief, community, or institution must make a certain kind of ontological claim may seem wrong-headed—and perhaps especially so to those who study religions across cultures. Those who agree with the functionalist and problem-solving approach described above may want to stop there and avoid opening the door to the nonscientific and contested questions of ontology. I therefore want to begin with an anecdote to make the connection between normative practices and ontology—between the religious marriage of facts and values—seem as commonsensical as I can.

When I was a kid, I used to play a ball game in the streets near my house. The players faced in toward each other, and when a car came up the street behind those down the way, we would warn them: “Get out of the street—cars coming.” The first half of this shout is a recommendation for action. The second half is a description of something perceived that is intended to justify the recommendation. What I want to point out is how usual, how quotidian, is this linked pair of recommended action and ontological justification. In fact, to base one’s recommendations on some alleged fact about the way things are in the world is so taken for granted that most likely we kids never said the entire sentence quoted above; we would just holler, “Car!” and the meaning would be clear. Given our shared practice, the ontological claim by itself was enough to imply—or even constitute—the recommendation.

One can label this view that proper behavior should be based on something that exists: normative realism. How strange it would be to imagine one of us kids saying, “You should get out of the street” without the threat of a car, unless someone was joking. Analogously, it is not usual to make recommendations in other forms of practice without an explicit or implicit reference to a reality that is supposed to justify that action.¹⁹ That one

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of traditional moral inquiry supports my view in that he argues that the separation of recommendations from a vision of the way things are reflects a particularly modern form of alienation: “The variety of words translatable as ‘ought’ in ancient

should drink orange juice if one has a cold is said to be based on certain properties of the juice. That one should vote for so-and-so is said to be the right thing to do if one wants lower taxes. (The alleged realities may turn out to be specious, of course: that one should go to Tibet if one wants to see Shangri-la or that one should be more open to romance this month if one is a Sagittarius also involve claims about the way the world works, claims that may not hold up to scrutiny. But even recommendations for action based on specious claims illustrate how recommendations for action are usually linked to the way things are said to be.) People ordinarily understand their values as realistic. They hold that their values and ways of life are not arbitrary or groundless inventions, but rather based on the way things are.

My proposal is that religion is the same: religious communities make recommendations for how one should act in order to solve a problem in one's life, with the understanding that those recommendations accord with the nature of things. The therapies that the religions offer are alleged to work because they are based on truths about what is real. To give two passing but well-known examples, the straight path of Islam that is marked out by Shariah law is authorized by reference to the revealed word of the Creator and Judge of the world. And the monastic path of cultivating nonattachment in Buddhism is authorized by reference to the Buddha's insight that everything that exists is empty, impermanent, and without self and therefore attachment reflects false views. In both cases, the recommended practice is understood to be realistic. If we see religions as making promises, then the desire among religious communities to "go ontological" is not the product of metaphysical wonder or disconnected fantasy but rather a discursively expected implication of making a promise. Religions make ontological claims because such claims answer the question, What makes the promise come true?

Granted, one might participate in a practice and not know why it works. One might also participate in a practice and not even wonder why it works. Practitioners typically develop an explicit justification only when a practice fails or is challenged. Justifying one's practices is then a second-order form of discourse and reflection. But to have a belief is to take something as true, and people take something as true as soon as they act in any purposive way. Therefore, even in cases in which a religious community has not developed an explicit ontological account that justifies its practices, identifying practices by an ontological account is still appropriate. This is so because agents have a prereflective understanding of the world in which they operate. It is precisely this prereflective engagement with the world that one seeks to make reflective when one's practices fail or are challenged. We

and medieval languages never have a sense which allows them a mandatory force independently of the reasons given for uttering the statements which are expressed by means of them" (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990], 93).

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might be able to find a religion that had not developed an explicit ontological justification for a given practice, but we will not find one that does not have even a prereflective understanding of the world, an understanding of the world that makes that practice intelligible. For this reason, we can define religion as normative practices that at least implicitly make ontological claims in terms of which the practical norms are authorized. Moreover, a context of a diversity of such paths has characterized almost all human history, at least since the emergence of cities roughly five thousand years ago. As a consequence, interreligious challenge and change over time are so usual that to find a religious practice that has not been pushed to reflect on its own practices and to develop explicit ontological claims to justify them will be rare. Given my interest as a philosopher in the cognitive aspects of religious practice, I therefore include this normative realism in my definition of religion.

On this definition of religion, then, the practical and the cognitive aspects of religion are interdependent. Here, making truth claims is intrinsic to religion, and one cannot identify religious practices without them. I distinguish between religious practices and the understanding of the world that gives them sense, as promises made and promises kept, but religion as it is lived is not on my understanding dichotomous, any more than is the shout "Car!"

V. THE GROWING VARIETY OF RELIGIOUS REALITIES

I hope that I have said enough to explain why I think that religious communities do not merely make recommendations about how one should conduct oneself, but also that those recommendations reflect a commitment to a religious reality. But the question now is whether we *can* identify a certain distinctive reality or aspect of reality that can be used to distinguish religious from nonreligious practices, beliefs, and institutions. To distinguish religions by the kind of reality to which they refer is to develop a substantive definition. But is there a substantive definition that is broad enough to include everything that we want to study but not so broad that it returns us to the all-inclusive definitions above? Can one specify a kind of reality that defines religion?

This question is the linchpin of substantive definitions. The most popular substantive definition operating in the study of religions today is some version of Edward Tylor's definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings. But it is not the only option. It is important to see that substantive definitions of religion have a history, a history of stretching and adapting the word "religion" for use in emerging circumstances and purposes. I distinguish four stages.

One sees the first stage in the history of substantive definition of "religion" among those Christians, the inheritors of Augustine's use of the word,

who held, unsurprisingly, that the reality that defines religion is the reality of the Christian God. They employed the concept *religion* to refer to what they themselves did. It follows straightforwardly from this use of “religion” that those who did not know of this reality thereby lacked religion. One sees this identification of religion and Christianity in Christopher Columbus, for instance, when he wrote that the Native Americans seemed to lack all knowledge of religion—even idolatry. This definition of religion still operated centuries later: writing in 1858, James Gardner states that the Xhosa in southern Africa lack religion since “it seems that those of them who are still in their heathen state have no idea (1) of a Supreme Intelligent Ruler of the universe; (2) of the sabbath; (3) of a day of judgment; (4) of the guilt and pollution of sin; (5) of a Savior to deliver them from the wrath to come.”²⁰ This account of the Christian beliefs that makes something a religion is a substantive definition of religion, and given my claim that definitions of religion are strategies judged by their purposes and not by the world, I cannot say that it is an incoherent definition. But it is useless for the cross-cultural philosophy of religions.²¹

The second stage in the development of a substantive definition of religion deliberately seeks to stretch the explicitly Christian understanding of God to create a concept that can include both Christian and at least some non-Christian phenomena. In this sense, the second stage is really the first that provides a definition of religion for cross-cultural or comparative accounts of religion. With this important conceptual move, “religion” becomes a genus.²² This shift constitutes, as Wittgenstein would say, a change in the grammar of the concept. As an example of this process of stretching and abstraction, take the work of Edward Herbert.²³

To develop a concept of religions in the plural, Herbert distinguishes between what he calls the “natural”—that is, the generic—elements of religion from the idiosyncratic elements. According to Herbert, all religions

²⁰ See David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 85.

²¹ For the use of substantive definitions of religion to exclude and debase colonized people, see S. N. Balagangadhara, “*The Heathen in His Blindness. . .*”: *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); and Chidester, *Savage Systems*.

²² It is this conceptual innovation that is rejected by John Milbank, who argues that “religion is not a genus” (“The End of Dialogue,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990], esp. 176–81).

²³ For a much richer account of the emergence of the comparative study of religion as a project of the Enlightenment, and an argument that this emergence should be dated to the seventeenth century, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Roger Johnson concurs (“Natural Religion, Common Notions, and the Study of Religions: Lord Herbert of Cherbury [1583–1648],” *Religion* 24, no. 3 [July 1994]: 213–24). For perhaps the best analyses of how the Enlightenment concept of natural religion puts Christianity into comparable history, see Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Peter Harrison, “*Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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do not worship the Christian God, of course, but they do all worship some notion of a supreme deity.²⁴ Call this a theistic definition of religion. It is clear that Herbert's idea of a supreme deity is adapted from the Calvinist Christianity he preferred. And Herbert no doubt promotes this least common denominator theism, this precursor of deism, in order to avoid the divisiveness that had led in the preceding century to so much violence among Christians. But to reach his theological goal of rejecting an exclusivist understanding of salvation, Herbert stretches the concept of religion, and so we should see his proposal not only as a theological position but also as an attempt to develop a more inclusive understanding of what defines a belief as substantively religious. Herbert excises from the earlier understanding of the concept the idea of original sin, and therefore he also excises the idea of a savior. He also fails to include not just the Gospels, or even some scriptures or other, but the need for any revelation at all. Since any savior or revelation would be present in one or some religions but not all, they cannot be part of the definition of religions in general.

The novelty of Herbert's theistic definition of religion has been noted before.²⁵ But it is also worth noting that as Herbert stretches the privileged concept of religion to fit non-Christian materials (so to speak, using "our" word to apply to "them"), he performs a parallel move of deploying negative concepts previously used to disparage non-Christian religions to apply to Christianity. Thus, Herbert takes the term "imposture"—until then used to refer to the teachings of false prophets, above all Muhammad—and uses it to apply to the "priestcraft" that Herbert says can be found in all religions, including Christianity.²⁶ Given Herbert's definition, then, "religion" no longer refers only to Christianity and its heresies but rather to a variety of healthy and harmful ways that people have understood and related themselves to a supreme being.

How inclusive is this more inclusive substantive definition? What fit Herbert's theistic definition most easily will be other monotheistic religions: Herbert knows best the Protestant and Catholic churches, Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. Herbert knows about pagan polytheistic traditions as well, of course, but to make them fit his substantive definition he argues either that there is one God above the others or that multiple Gods or revered natural phenomena (such as the sun or stars) are actually representa-

²⁴ More specifically, Herbert proposes that the generic elements of religion, what he calls the five "Common Notions," include both pragmatic and ontological elements: a religion will teach (1) that there is a supreme deity; (2) that this deity ought to be worshipped; (3) that combining one's piety with virtue is the most important aspect of religious practice; (4) that people should repent of their wrongdoings; and (5) that there is reward and punishment for one's actions "both in this Life, and after it" (see Edward Herbert, *The Ancient Religion of the Gentiles* [London: John Nutt, 1705], 3–4).

²⁵ Samuel Preus (*Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987], ix–xii, 206) and Guy Stroumsa (*A New Science*, chap. 1) both call Herbert's revised definition of religion a "paradigm shift."

²⁶ Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 34, chap. 6.

tions of the supreme God. Despite this procrustean tactic, one can see that a theistic definition represents a conceptual shift that creates *religion* as a new taxon and makes the cross-cultural or comparative study of religions conceptually possible. This interpretation of Herbert's contribution gives us a much more radical interpretation of Friedrich Max Müller's famous quote: "He who knows one, knows none."²⁷ This slogan meant for Müller that one does not really know one religion until one compares it to others. But it can also point to the conceptual point that religions cannot even be conceived qua religion until there are more than one. This definition does not entail that all religions are equal. But it does entail that multiple paths are equally religions.

Given Herbert's generic Supreme Being, one can now see that Edward Tylor's animism is actually a third attempt at a substantive definition of religion.²⁸ Like Herbert, Tylor sought to develop a more inclusive concept that would gather the cultural phenomena included in earlier substantive definitions, plus more. Also like Herbert, Tylor sees himself as working in the tradition of defining "natural religion."²⁹ But as Tylor explicitly notes, he excises even more elements from previous definitions in order to abstract from the data a thinner and therefore even more inclusive approach: "By requiring in this definition the belief in a supreme deity or of judgment after death [as Herbert had still required], the adoration of idols or the practice of sacrifice, or other partially-diffused doctrines or rites, no doubt many tribes may be excluded from the category of religious. But such narrow definition has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them."³⁰ Tylor consequently ends up with his animist definition of religion as simply "belief in Spiritual Beings."³¹ This definition then treats as religions not only the prac-

²⁷ Friedrich Max Müller, quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 31.

²⁸ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970). For important defenses of Tylor's definition of religion, see Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *British Journal of Sociology* 12, no. 2 (June 1961): 142–64; Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation"; Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 1–2; and Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). J. Z. Smith notes that Tylor's definition was the organizing taxon in the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religions* for which he served as editor (see J. Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 165). The literature includes considerable debate about what makes a being "spiritual." Some prefer to speak of "supernatural beings"; Spiro recommends "superhuman beings," and some cognitive scientists use "nonobvious" or "counterintuitive beings." Tylor's definition has become the default understanding of a substantive definition to the extent that sometimes the substantive approach is simply identified with a Tylorian definition (e.g., Peter Byrne, "The Definition of Religion: Squaring the Circle," in *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts, and Contests*, ed. Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 382–83).

²⁹ Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture*, 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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tices, beliefs, and institutions of the monotheistic traditions but also those concerning nature spirits, departed souls, and spiritual hierarchies. For the purposes of a cross-cultural philosophy of religions, Tylor's definition of the distinctive reality of religious phenomena lets us include polytheistic traditions without assuming that they are covertly or implicitly monotheistic. It is therefore better than its predecessors not because polytheistic religions "really are" religions and his definition reflects the discovery of that truth; rather, it is better for those who want a broader genus that lets us include both monotheistic and polytheistic practices as religions.

If one looks on Tylor's animistic definition of religion not as *the* substantive definition but rather as an attempt—in fact, the third attempt—at a substantive strategy for defining religion, then we can now ask whether this strategy is one that we want for our purposes. Herbert's strategy let people gather Christianity together with other monotheisms and thereby let one speak of religions in the plural. Tylor's strategy let one gather all of those monotheisms together with other beliefs in spiritual beings so that we could speak of monotheistic religions as kin to polytheistic religions (as Tylor confessed was part of his goal in treating the study of culture as a reformer's science). This puts us at the point at which one can develop an even broader understanding of the substantive or ontological aspect of religion. I recommend, namely, a definition of religion that treats as religious not only those who believe in the Trinity (with Augustine), not only those who believe in a supreme God (with Herbert), and not only those who believe in spiritual beings (with Tylor) but also those who believe in religious realities that are not theistic. This understanding of religious realities is intended to include those other substantive approaches, plus more, and such a definition therefore enables the student of religions to recognize that, just as there can be many kinds of religious functions, there can be many kinds of religious realities.

The question whether there might be nontheistic religions has been an undercurrent in the debates about how to define religions for about a century. In fact, as soon as Tylor proposed that religion was defined by a focus on spiritual beings, his definition was critiqued as inappropriately excluding non-person-like religious forces such as the *mana* of Melanesia and the *wakan* of the Dakota.³² The two best-known twentieth-century definitions of religion that include nontheistic conceptions as the substance of religion are probably those of William James, who defines religion in terms of any "unseen order,"³³ and Clifford Geertz, who defines religion in terms

³² Goody, "Religion and Ritual," 143.

³³ Recognizing the disparate varieties of religious experience, William James sought to frame "religion in the broadest and most general terms possible," and he arrived at a concise (mixed or "dithetic") formula for religion as "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (*The Varieties of Religious Experiences: A Study in Human Nature* [New York: Macmillan, 1961], 59). James saw different religions as competing recipes for how people might understand the relation of their own powers to the other forces that make up the world, and the "unseen order," the ontological substance

of any “general order of existence.”³⁴ And today, more and more scholars are stretching definitions of religion that had referred to “agencies” or “beings” to refer more generally to both person-like and non-person-like “powers” or “forces.” Thus, we find substantive definitions that refer to “a level of reality beyond the observable world known to science” or an “order of reality beyond or behind the apparent, given order.”³⁵ This is the fourth stage of substantive definitions of religion.

The primary and as yet unmet challenge to developing a substantive definition of religion that includes nontheistic realities as religious, however, is whether an idea like “unseen order” or “general order of existence” can be given analytic bite. “Order” and “level of reality” are pretty vague terms. How does one conceive of such religious realities as distinct from nonreligious ones?³⁶ A view I consider a dead end is to try to identify religious

of religion, was whatever it is that sustains moral purpose in the universe. On James’s idea of a moral order, see Wayne Proudfoot, “William James on an Unseen Order,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 1 (January 2000): 51–66. For his nontheistic understanding of the ontological possibilities, I read James as drawing on Matthew Arnold, who had argued a generation earlier for a nontheistic reinterpretation of God as “the not ourselves which makes for righteousness” (*Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* [1873; repr., London: Smith, Elder, 1883], 46). I read Arnold in turn as drawing on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Essays* (1841/1844), and Emerson was James’s godfather.

³⁴ Geertz’s famous multipart definition of religion is often treated as a functional definition, but it is actually a mixed one since, like James’s, it includes as its ontological element “conceptions of a general order of existence” (*The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: Basic, 1973], 90). In Geertz’s eyes, religion does have pragmatic functions, namely, to understand the natural world, how to suffer, and how to be good. Thus, the pragmatic aspect of religion for Geertz is to provide and sustain a meaningful framework for interpreting the world—especially in the face of the challenges of baffling, anomalous experiences, of suffering, and of moral struggles (esp. 100–106). But the solutions to these problems that are on this definition religious solutions are only those that ground a meaningful life in a vision of “the very nature of reality” or of “the way things in their sheer actuality are” (128, 127). Unlike the instincts of nonhuman animals, Geertz argues, the symbols of human culture seek simultaneously to guide action and to offer an ontological account of the way the world is, an account that makes the recommended action realistic. As Geertz puts the ontological point, religious people are realists: “Though in theory we might think that a people could construct a wholly autonomous value system independent of any metaphysical referent, an ethics without an ontology, we do not in fact seem to have found such a people” (127). For critiques of Geertz’s definition of religion, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), chap. 1; and Nancy Frankenberry and Hans Penner, “Geertz’s Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions,” *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 4 (October 1999): 617–40. For a defense, see Kevin Schilbrack, “Religion, Models of, and Reality: Are We through with Geertz?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (June 2005): 429–52.

³⁵ David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper, 1978), 12; Byrne, “The Definition of Religion,” 385.

³⁶ Jack Goody, a Tylorean, calls this question “the main difficulty” of substantive approaches (“Religion and Ritual,” 145). My definition of religion is similar to what Peter Byrne has proposed as “the moral definition of ‘religion’” (*The Moral Interpretation of Religion* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998], and “The Definition of Religion,” in that he and I agree on both the important points that functionalist and substantive aspects of religion have a “necessary interdependence” (Byrne, “The Definition of Religion,” 387) and that a definition of religion today needs to include nontheistic conceptions. My proposal differs from his in that it recommends (i) a broader understanding of the functions that religions seek to provide in

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realities with another world. The attempt to distinguish religious from non-religious with the language of a world “beyond,” “behind,” “transcendent,” or “supernatural” has had, in my judgment, a pernicious effect on the study of religions. These terms impose on all religions a cosmic dualism that is found in only some of them. And it is misleading in the extreme to say that religious people invest themselves in another world. Religious communities invest themselves in sacred lands, in human beings who are holy, and in those holy peoples’ remains, and in temples, clothes, dances, gestures, sacrifices, temples, flags, drinks, and so on. Religion is no less “worldly” than other dimensions of human culture. The study of religion needs to be rematerialized,³⁷ assuming dualism is not the way to ground a more inclusive substantive definition.

Here is my alternative. Without buying into any particular account of empiricism, one can distinguish between those realities that are available to our senses and those that are not. The set of empirical realities includes everything that can be seen, tasted, smelled, touched, and heard, and also what can be perceived in these ways with technological help. Thus, the empirical world includes this mountain range, that group of people, and the heat of the fire, and also other much larger or smaller realities like the Horsehead Nebula or water molecules. In the set of nonempirical realities, I place moral principles, aesthetic judgments, and mathematical rules. People claim to experience nonempirical realities like these when they feel the presence of values, including a sense of self-worth, a trust that life is good, the idea of being unforgiven, deserving, lovable, execrable, or ugly, and the moral requirement that one act in one way rather than another.

Now, to say that religions always teach normative paths, as I have been recommending, is to say that religious communities always teach behavior based on and beliefs about nonempirical values. Thus, when a religious community regards an action as a divine command or it regards a person as a holy person, for example, it sees in that action or that person a sanctity, righteousness, or piety that is not apparent to the senses. But nonempirical judgments are equally found among nonreligious people. Political communities, for instance, hold up as models those actions and people that they consider patriotic, aristocratic, noble, or otherwise worth following or emulating, and so political communities equally regard some actions and people as imbued with nonempirical values. In both the religious and the political cases, people, places, and actions are seen as embodying propriety or goodness—and this is what it means to say that culture is a moral order. All forms of culture involve nonempirical judgments. All forms of culture are evaluative and will seek to speak through symbols and metaphors to

addition to theodicy, and (ii) greater specificity about what it means to identify a nontheistic but still religious “order of reality beyond or behind the apparent, given order” (385).

³⁷ For an excellent example of this work, see Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

describe invisible orders of significance and value. As a consequence, one cannot say that the difference between what is and is not religion is that religions speak of nonempirical realities. The difference, rather, is this: if we ask whether the existence of those nonempirical realities—the norms of goodness, beauty, and justice, and so on—depends on the human and other beings of the empirical world, religious communities are those that answer no. Religious communities, on this account, are those that hold that some nonempirical realities exist independent of empirical sources. Non-religious communities, by contrast, are those that see the existence of their values as contingent on empirical sources—typically, either the particular social practices of human history or by practical reason as such. Religious communities are those that adopt values that they do not believe depend on human or other empirical forms of agency. I will call those nonempirical aspects of reality whose existence allegedly does not depend on empirical sources “superempirical.” Thus, religions are composed of those social practices authorized by reference to a superempirical reality, that is, a reference to the character of the Gods, the will of the Supreme Being, the metaphysical nature of things, or the like.³⁸ In short, I define religion as forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical.

This proposal for a more inclusive understanding of the substantive aspect of religion is intended to include everything in the previous versions. Augustine’s Christian definition, Herbert’s broader theistic definition, and Tylor’s even broader animistic definition all sought to define religion in terms of a reality or realities that are superempirical. Those substantive approaches are therefore not replaced by but rather nested in this one.

VI. WHAT THIS DEFINITION EXCLUDES

The argument thus far has been rather abstract; let me be more concrete. If one agrees that this mixed definition of religion is the most useful, then one treats as religious those practices, beliefs, and institutions that recommend normative paths based on superempirical realities. How does this definition of religion sort the possible data of religious studies?

The approach I recommend classifies as religious some traditions, practices, and beliefs that were excluded by earlier substantive definitions. The most contested case in the modern study of religion is Buddhism, the so-called litmus test for a definition of religion.³⁹ But the concerns about Bud-

³⁸ I borrow the term “superempirical” from Christian Smith, who wrote: “Religions are set of beliefs, symbols, and practices about the reality of superempirical orders that make claims to organize and guide human life” (*Moral, Believing Animals*, 98). By “metaphysical,” I follow Charles Hartshorne’s definition of metaphysics as nonrestrictive existential claims (see Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophical Method* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983], esp. chaps. 2 and 8).

³⁹ Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Modern Society: Citizenship, Secularisation and the State* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2011), xxiii; cf. Martin Southwold, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion,” *Man*, n.s. 13, no. 3 (September 1978): 362–79.

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dhism (especially Theravada Buddhism) arise because to classify Buddhism as a religion would be to admit an atheistic religion. Melford Spiro, defending a Tylorean definition of religion, argues that Buddhism can be treated as a religion because in practice it has absorbed belief in pre-Buddhist superhuman beings: "Even if Theravada Buddhism were absolutely atheistic, it cannot be denied that Theravada Buddhists adhere to another belief system which is theistic to its core."⁴⁰ Given the definition I propose, however, Buddhism could be counted as a religion not because Buddhists do not exclude relations with superhuman beings but because religion does not require them. Buddhism is a religion to the extent that its promise of liberation is based on the superempirical character of reality. Buddhists speak of selflessness, impermanence, and emptiness as the three marks of existence, truths about the character of reality that are not conditional and that one must realize to make progress on the Buddhist path. For Spiro, if Theravada Buddhists did eschew bodhisattvas, nats, and other superhuman beings, then the Eightfold Path would be best understood as nonreligious. But on my account, even if one sets aside the belief in superhuman beings, if Theravada Buddhists see their path as authorized by the nature of things, then they practice a religion.

Such a definition gives us a tool with which we might recognize other nontheistic traditions as religious. Here are five examples. If Confucianism, for example, is solely a state ideology or a form of virtue ethics, drawn from the teachings of sage kings, and not based on an invisible moral order, then it would not be a religion. However, if the kings were sage precisely because they were able to perceive a Dao that was not a product of human practices but rather a set of principles to which human families and institutions themselves ought to bend, then it would. Similarly, the Stoics sought to discipline human passions to put one's life in harmony with Logos, the universal reason inherent in all things. On this definition, their pantheism could be treated as religious and not solely as philosophical. For the Mīmāṃsā school of Hindu philosophy, the authority of ritual obligations and prerogatives is based on the Vedas alone, understood as authorless and eternal and so as a superempirical reality. Mīmāṃsākas are not less religious because the dharma they teach is atheistic. And there is debate about whether Daoism teaches a Way that is a metaphysical reality or simply a balanced style of living. Insofar as Daoists teach the former, their promises are on my account religious. Finally, on this definition, Alcoholics Anonymous, despite the deliberate vagueness of the Power it refers to, could also be classified as a religion.

This inclusiveness points to an important feature of the definition I recommend. I argued above that the word "religion" began as a Christian

⁴⁰ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," 94.

term of art. If the two notions of promissory functions and superempirical realities are coherent, however, they let us define religion in such a way that Christianity is still prototypical, but it is not more prototypical than, say, Buddhism or Stoicism. The concept of God is not “more superempirical” than that of karma or Logos. Moreover, since a religion on this definition is a set of practices and not simply a matter of superempirical beliefs, this definition avoids the criticisms of those who argue that the term “religion” is inescapably colonialist or imperialist because it privileges interiority, faith, or beliefs.

My argument that the best definition of religion will include the possibility of nontheistic religions is not because “we now know” that Buddhism, Daoism, and so on really are religions. Given my view that a definition of religion is a strategy, I hold that scholars of religion cannot argue like that. My view is that if a scholar of religion is interested in studying practices that refer to superempirical realities (whether theistic, polytheistic, or nontheistic), then she should define religion in the way that I am recommending and say that religions can come in this form. My view is that a concept stretched in this direction to include nontheistic superempirical beliefs and practices is productive for the cross-cultural comparisons that we want to make today.

My own sense, however, is that the primary value of the definition I am recommending is not that it lets us include more. My sense is that the functional definitions of religion being used in the field—especially Tillich’s and other axiological definitions that treat “religion” as that which provides orientation for life—are so capacious that they already let us include too much. In my judgment, the most important criterion for a definition of religion today is not that it recognizes a variety of religions but rather that it gives us a workable sense of where that variety begins and ends. What we want is *a bounded variety*.⁴¹ So let me return to my title: What is not religion?

On the definition that I am proposing, there are two sets of cultural phenomena that have been considered religious on other approaches but would not be considered religious here. On the one hand, there are those cultural phenomena in region 3 that refer to a superempirical reality and are there-

⁴¹ It is worth noting that to limit the range of religion in the way I am recommending has two important consequences for the study of religions around the world. First, it facilitates the study of secularization. If one defines religion in axiological terms as a commitment to whatever functions as one’s ultimate concern, then religion is made universal by definition. Given that approach, it follows that though the mode of religiosity might change, no individual and no culture can become less religious, let alone nonreligious, and the hypotheses of secularization are disproven without empirical work. Second, using a limited definition of religion like mine makes it possible to speak of multiple religious identities. Again, if one defines religion functionally as an ultimate concern, then it is problematic if not incoherent to say that a person has multiple concerns that are all ultimate. An axiological definition of religion implies that a person can fully participate in only one religion. By contrast, questions such as “Does the spread of modern forms of life entail the decrease in religious belief and practice?” and “To how many religious communities does a person belong?” are open questions on my definition of religion.

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fore substantively religious but include no reference to a religious practice: call them “mere belief.” Plato’s ideas, Hegel’s absolute idealism, and Nussbaum’s Natural Law may be superempirical, but insofar as they do not lead to rituals, ceremonies, or other pragmatic activities, they would not count as religious. (By contrast, those like Aquinas or Locke who see Natural Law as a creation of the God they worship would be religious philosophers.) Religion is not identical to metaphysics. On this definition, a religion is not a private mental state, and so a belief that God or some other superempirical reality exists, independent of its relevance to conduct, would not count as religious.

On the other hand, excluded by this definition are those region I cultural phenomena that are functionally religious but that include no reference to a superempirical reality. This position is much more popular in religious studies, so let me discuss two illustrative examples.

Samuel Snyder uses the language of religious experience to understand those anglers who speak about their wet hours of fly-fishing as meditative times, of rivers as sacred places, and of fishing as providing a sense of connection to nature and motivating them to environmental conservation, and he suggests that fly-fishing can therefore be considered a religion.⁴² On my approach, whether this is a religion turns, we might say, on the nature of the water. If fly-fishing is a way of enjoying a river or a day or the fish—tangible, visible, empirical realities—then on this account it would not yet be a religion. Even if fly-fishing is tapping into an experience of nonempirical values such as individualism or family or participating in a tradition that has been handed down for generations, on this account it would not yet be a religion. Snyder suggests that in a traditional fly-fishing pole and the hand-made lures, the sport has ritual implements; in the complicated steps involved in learning how to cast, it has ritual training; and in the physical movement to often remote and nonindustrialized mountains and rivers, it offers a form of pilgrimage. But these processes of ritualizing are not enough to make a practice a religion. Fly-fishing also leads some of its practitioners to treasure the natural world and to embrace an environmental ethic. But a moral path is not necessarily religious. However, if fly-fishing becomes a way for a person to get closer to the Creator or if a person actually comes to revere Nature-as-a-whole, à la Spinoza, as that which orients the authentic life (two possibilities that Snyder considers) or if the river is itself a divine being (another possibility that one finds in the world), then on this definition the actions could be considered religious.⁴³ The key is that the rituals

⁴² Samuel Snyder, “New Streams of Religion: Fly-Fishing as Lived, Religion of Nature,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 3 (December 2007): 896–922; cf. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁴³ For contemporary treatments of nature itself as a religious reality, see Donald Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); and Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

and the ethics of the activity need to connect the practitioners to a superempirical reality.

A second example comes from Ira Chernus, who suggests that for some neoconservative politicians the War on Terror is a religious act.⁴⁴ Chernus quotes neoconservatives who argue that the war is far more than a geopolitical struggle; they connect that armed struggle with nonempirical values, saying things like, “It is crucial to all human beings at all times that they encounter a world that possesses transcendent meaning, a world in which human experience makes sense.”⁴⁵ How would my approach deal with an example like this? There is no doubt that war can provide people with a sense of purpose and meaning: a nice example is the protagonist of the movie *The Hurt Locker*, and Chris Hedges wrote a best seller entitled *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002). But if the War on Terror gives a soldier a sense of purpose, simply meeting that function does not make it a religion. If the war brings a nation together, meeting that function also does not make it a religion. However, if one holds that justice itself is not merely the product of the American way of life, American interests, and the Constitution, but is rather a transcendent aspect of the cosmos, then the war can be read as religious. Or if one feels that this war is just according to the biblically inspired criteria of a just war and that therefore in taking up arms against terrorists one seeks to do God’s will, then the war can be read as religious. And many of the neoconservatives whom Chernus quotes believe precisely this. Wars are religious when they are based on reference to a superempirical reality.

The nonempirical/superempirical distinction is central to what I want to exclude. The nation, for example, is a nonempirical reality, an imaginary community that cannot be seen with the eyes. Given the definition of religion at play here, reverence for the nation would not be counted as religious when the nation is seen as solely a product of human blood, sweat, and genius. But when the nation is seen as the embodiment of values that exist independent of human activities—such as the will of God—then one can speak of religious nationalisms.⁴⁶ Similarly, Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of capitalism is not superempirical since its existence depends on

⁴⁴ See Ira Chernus, *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006); cf. his “The War in Iraq and the Academic Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76:, no. 4 (December 2008): 844–73.

⁴⁵ Chernus, “The War in Iraq and the Academic Study of Religion,” 848.

⁴⁶ The maximalist overlap of religion and politics is on my account unsurprising, and so I want to signal clearly my disagreement with those like Daniel Philpott who define religion in terms of superempirical rather than political or other worldly concerns: “Religions are not first and foremost concerned with or defined by what political orders do or look like, that is, their principles of legitimacy, structure, policies, or pursuits. Rather, they are communities of belief and practices oriented around claims about the ultimate grounds of existence” (Philpott, “Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 [June 2009]: 192).

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the human practices of the market. Analogous cases can be made for Marxism, for fans of sports teams, for the love of money, or for secular humanism: if the proletariat, the team, the lucre, or humanity itself is seen solely as the product of human activity, then devotion to it would not be counted as religions. Formally speaking, what are not religions are the contents of region 1 and region 3 in the Venn diagram. A slogan for my proposal, then, might be that on this account, what is not a religion is mere practice or mere belief. One must have both.

As I said at the outset, religion is not a natural kind and so the test of any definition of “religion” is its usefulness. It follows that definitions of religion are not neutral but rather serve some purpose or another. What then is the usefulness of this definition? Why pick out this set of practices as a distinct social taxon? The definition of religion I have proposed gives scholars a principled way to include nontheistic traditions as religious without also thereby including all forms of communal meaning-making. Though scholars are not limited to the colloquial use of terms, what this definition treats as religion and what it excludes track the colloquial use nicely.⁴⁷ Moreover, it names this set of human activities as distinct in order to make them subject to two broad kinds of inquiry. The first kind comes from those philosophers and others interested in normative questions about the character of reality, what people can know of it and how, and whether this knowledge does or should influence proper behavior. This definition picks out the practices predicated on the idea that superempirical realities exist, that one can know them, and that one ought to live in accord with them, so that these practices can be the object of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical debate. The second kind of inquiry comes from those historians and others interested in explanatory questions about the ways in which social identity and a social order are formed and legitimated. This definition picks out those forms of social management that are said to be authorized by a reality that has no empirical source, so that these practices can be the object of anthropological, psychological, and political inquiry. This definition does not separate religion from politics or culture. Nor does it suggest that religion is unique in its function of providing meaning for life, that it is universal, or that it is intrinsically irrational or violent. But it does permit both normative and explanatory kinds of inquiry to make possible a pursuit of the study of religions that is multidisciplinary and polymethodical.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Craig Martin suggests that because “religion” is a social construction, no monothetic definition can make sense of the colloquial use of the term (see *Masking Hegemony*, 17–19; see also Southwold, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion”).

⁴⁸ For an argument against polymethodism, see Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (September 2012): 587–97. For a defense and a map of the relation between interpretive, explanatory, and normative approaches to the study of religion, see Kevin Schilbrack, *The Future of Philosophy of Religion* (London: Blackwell, 2013), chap. 7.