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## Religions: Are There Any?

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**ABSTRACT:** Several scholars have recently argued that the concept of "religion" is manufactured, constructed, invented, or imagined, but does not correspond to an objective reality, "out there" in the world. This paper seeks to evaluate that critique. I argue that the critique is composed of three levels or threads: that "religion" is a social construction, that the term distorts one's perceptions of the reality it seeks to name, and that it is ideologically poisonous. Granting the partial truth of these three arguments, the paper agrees with the critics that a naive realism about religion is indefensible. However, some of the critics draw the conclusion that "there is no such thing as religion" or "there are no religions," but I reject this conclusion. I seek, instead, to develop a critical realist view of the concept of religion that is able both to take into account the history of the semantics of the concept and, nevertheless, to see the study of religion as the study of patterns of behavior which are independent of the scholar.

Several scholars have recently argued that the concept of "religion" is manufactured, constructed, invented, or imagined, but does not correspond to an objective reality, "out there" in the world.<sup>1</sup> If one thinks of deconstruction in a nontechnical sense as an approach that takes meanings that are unreflectively taken as real and seeks to reveal them as conceptually unstable, historically emergent, and ideologically motivated, then these critics are pursuing the deconstruction of the concept of religion.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to evaluate that critique.

Here is a summary of this paper's trajectory. There is an unreflective, but widespread, view of religion that takes religion as something that exists independent of the concepts with which it is described. From this perspective, religion has a certain objective character and the scholar's task is to discover it. Call this view of religion "naive realism." I believe that in the face of the critique, a naive realism about religion is indefensible. Nevertheless, some of the critics draw the conclusion that "there is no such thing as religion" or "there are no religions," but I argue that this anti-realist view of religion does not follow from the critique. I seek, instead, to develop a chastened view of the concept of religion, a critical realism, that takes into account the contribution of the modern western provenance of the concept, but nevertheless sees the study of religion as the study of a social reality that is in the crucial respects independent of the scholar.<sup>3</sup>

## THE CRITIQUE OF “RELIGION”

In my judgment, the critique of the concept of religion can be profitably sorted into three distinguishable levels.

The first level of the critique is that the term “religion” is a social construction.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not religion has always existed, critics say, the concept religion is a relatively recent invention. According to them, the concept of “a” religion as a particular system of beliefs embodied in a bounded community was largely unknown prior to the seventeenth century, and the concept of “religion” as a generic something which different cultures (or all cultures) share was not thought until the nineteenth century (Smith 1962: chap. 1). Before the modern age in the West, what is now called religion permeated the culture and was inseparable from other aspects of the culture. There was no term for the so-called religious aspect of a culture as opposed to the so-called nonreligious aspects. Moreover, there was no term for the religion of one’s own culture as opposed to the religions of another culture, and so there had been no term for something of which Christianity was but one type of several. One may speculate about whether modern Europeans developed the concept of religion because of the fragmentation of the Christian church in the Reformation or because of the explosion of information about non-European cultures, but the main point of the social constructionist critique of *religion* is that the concept is not universal. There is no word in classical Sanskrit for the concept and so “religion” does not appear in Hindu scriptures. There is also no word in Pali and so it also does not appear in Buddhist scriptures. There is no term for religion in Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian, or Native American languages (Smith 1962: chap. 2). There is not even a word for religion in the Hebrew Bible or in the Greek New Testament. It is only modern European Christians who generalized or abstracted from their own practices and developed the word “religion” as a term for sorting a certain kind of activity. The term “religion” in its modern sense is thus not a concept shared universally but rather a product of a particular modern, European, and Christian history.

The second level of the critique of “religion” is that the term distorts, it is said, the cultural phenomena on which it is imposed.<sup>5</sup> (One might say: if the accusation on the first level is that the term is a social construction, the accusation on second is that it is a *flawed* social construction.) The critics argue that the term “religion” is flawed, because it is not and cannot be culturally neutral but rather carries with it connotations derived from its modern, Western, Christian origins. To summarize this complaint, they argue that the term is flawed in three specific ways. In the first place, it is flawed simply because to use a single generic term for a variety of beliefs and practices hides differences and essentializes disparate ways of life. To say that scarification in a coming of age initiation is the same kind of thing as separating meat and milk dishes in accord with Biblical rules, and that both are the same kind of thing as believing that the cosmos is approaching the Last Days—that all of these are religion—implies an ahistorical, monolithic homogeneity.<sup>6</sup> In the second place, the critics argue that the term is flawed because to use a word that distinguishes the religious aspect of a culture from the political and other aspects of a culture reflects a modern “separation of church and state” understanding of what religion is, an understanding that has not been shared by most religious people in history. To use this word therefore implies that what “religion” describes is something distinct from economics, politics, and issues of power.<sup>7</sup> And the critics argue that the term is flawed in the third place because the word still carries the Christian sense that what is described as religion is one’s “faith” or one’s “beliefs,” that is, something private and interior.<sup>8</sup> In short, the critics hold that the term carries so much conceptual baggage that it is inevitably misleading.

The third level of the critique of “religion” is that the construction of “religion” is ideologically motivated. If the previous points were that “religion” is a social construction, and a distorting one at that, the third point is that the flaws are deliberate and the definition of religion serves the purposes of those who developed it. Specifically, the development of the concept of religion serves the purposes of modern western power. As Daniel Dubuisson says, with the emergence of the concept *religion*, “[a]t a single stroke, imperialism and colonialism were equally justified and even, with the impetus of missionary activity, received an unanticipated moral guarantee” (115).<sup>9</sup> The concept *religion* as an ideological weapon can be used in multiple ways. One use has been for Europeans to argue that other people have no religion. They are without spiritual values, understanding, or morals, and are closer to animals. Consequently, they are unable to govern themselves and to colonize them is a benefit to them (for multiple examples of this usage, see Chidester 1996). Another ideological use of the term has been for Europeans to argue the reverse, that non-Europeans are actually too religious, and that unlike the west where secular politics and

science are separated from the religious, other cultures are pre-modern and superstitious. In either strategy, the development of the concept of religion is a part of an orientalist and imperialist project. Defining religion is thus not innocent or apolitical but grows from and serves material interests. "Religion" is a social construction developed in a certain time and place in history, and it is developed for the purposes of those who needed that conceptual tool. The concept was developed not by someone musing about the nature of words, but rather as a tool in order to accomplish certain goals. And it was developed as a tool in a period when Europeans were seeking an ideological justification for their expansion into the New World of the Americas, the race for Africa, and the gunboat diplomacy in Asia.

In summary, then, the critique of "religion" points to constructivist, historicist, and ideological problems with the concept. The argument of the critics is that if religion is socially constructed, then religion is not a thing in the world but rather a product of Western imagination. This use of language distorts what it describes and is ideologically motivated to be pejorative towards nonwestern cultures.

Given this multifaceted challenge to the legitimacy of the concept of religion, what should students of religions do? Answers to this question can usefully be divided into abolitionist and retentionist responses: on the one hand, as seen above, the abolitionists argue that the term "religion" is so biased, so theologically and ideologically laden, that the best thing for scholars to do is to abandon it. They argue that the concept "religion" should be replaced with other concepts, and that therefore religious studies programs should be disbanded or reconceived. According to the abolitionists, in other words, reflexivity in the study of religions means deconstructing or dissolving both the object of study and the field erected to manage it. On the other hand, there are retentionists who agree that the concept of religion is problematic, but argue that it can be refined or redefined more carefully or more broadly, so that it is less distorting, less Christian, or less privatized, so that it is suitable for cross-cultural study.

In the remainder of this paper, I will give reasons for resisting the abolitionist view. In terms of a typology of social constructionists drawn up by Ian Hacking (1999), abolitionists are "rebellious" social constructionists: they believe not only (i) that religion as it is understood in the modern West is not determined by the nature of things and (ii) that the concept is distorting or harmful or both, but also (iii) that we would be better off if we did away with the idea altogether. They are rebellious in the sense that they want not only to unmask the concept of religion—to undermine the practical effectiveness of the term by exposing the function it serves—but also to disabuse others of the concept.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, I am a "reformist" social constructionist: I agree that the term is a social construction, and that some uses of the term are problematic, but I argue that the criticisms of the term should lead scholars to refine and not abandon the term. I turn now to my critical realist defense of the concept.

### **THE ONTOLOGY OF "RELIGION"**

My response to the first level of the critique is that the concept of "religion" is socially constructed, but religion nevertheless exists, "out there" in the world.

It is not unusual to hear some of those who point out that "religion" is a social construction draw the conclusion that "there is no such thing as religion," that "religion does not exist," or that religions are "nonexistent objects."<sup>11</sup> The critics suggest that social constructions (or at least this social construction) are projections or illusions that correspond to nothing outside the modern Western imagination. We can call this a deflationary account of social construction, and the argument is that scholars should drop the term because "religion" denotes, designates, or refers to nothing, and religion has no ontological status. On a deflationary account, there is no religion and no religions in the actual world. Religions are like chimeras, mythical animals that will not be found, no matter what stone one overturns (Dubuissou 11; Fitzgerald 1997: 49). Clearly, however, when one says that there is no such thing as religion, a great deal turns on what is meant by "thing," or what it is to be "real," and so it is a shame that these critics usually say so little about this. In fact, there is an irony here that theorists who are post-metaphysical in so many ways are raising and making central this ontological question. So, the ontological question is where I would like to start: if "religion" is a social construction, and I am agreeing that it is, then what kind of reality does the referent have?

As “religion” is a social construction and a product of human history, it clearly follows that religion does not exist as a natural kind— like lightning, say, or frogs. Religion does not exist apart from human ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Since religion is a social construction, the only reality that religious phenomena have, they have by tradition, convention, or agreement. It follows that if people had never thought, spoken, and acted in religious ways, or if they ceased to think, speak, and act in these ways, then what are often described as religious phenomena would not exist. If everyone were to cease to recognize holy days, for instance, there would be no more holy days. If everyone were to cease to recognize priests, there would be no more priests. The deflationary account is right about the socially constructed and relatively fragile ontology of religion. But to say that something exists merely by convention (or merely rhetorically, or merely by linguistic agreement) is not at all the same as saying that the entity does not exist.

To clarify how religion exists, it helps to distinguish between “socially dependent facts” whose existence depends upon human behavior and “socially independent facts” that would exist even had no human beings ever lived.<sup>12</sup> The existence of religion is clearly a socially dependent fact: it would not exist if there were no people. This dependence is something religion shares with other social patterns of behavior such as politics, sports, and the economy. “Barack Obama is the president of the United States of America” is another example of a socially dependent fact. Its existence depends on a cluster of human institutions, concepts, and actions. If people ceased to recognize presidents, then they would no longer exist. “The batter struck out” is another example of a socially dependent fact. Its existence depends on a different cluster of institutions, concepts, and actions. But “Jupiter is closer to the Sun than Saturn” and “Triceratops was an herbivore” are examples of socially independent facts.<sup>13</sup> The situations that those sentences describe were the case long before and whether or not any humans existed. But the point is that socially dependent facts are nonetheless facts. They are “out there,” in the world. As John Searle concisely puts it, even though socially dependent facts are ontologically subjective, they are also epistemically objective (1995: 7-9). They are ontologically subjective in the sense that they require human subjectivity in order to exist; they are brought into existence by and continue to depend on collective human agreement. But socially dependent facts are also epistemically objective in the sense that the facts that make them true are independent of what any individual person thinks. One may wish that Obama was not elected president, or that the last pitch was not a strike, or that one’s rent is not due on Wednesday. But noting that elections and baseball games and private property are social constructions will not change these facts. They are independent of one’s preferences or beliefs. And this independence is also part of the general ontology of any social fact, something that religion shares with politics, economics, sports, and other human institutions.

An anti-realist critic might argue that religion does not exist in the sense that the term is only an abstract term created by academics for their own sorting and comparing. In a well-known statement that is often read in this way, Jonathan Z. Smith says, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.”<sup>14</sup> Russell McCutcheon, who often cites the Smith quote just given, agrees, saying, “the category of religion is a conceptual tool and ought not to be confused with an ontological category actually existing in reality” (1997: viii).<sup>15</sup> Here “religion” exists as a way of thinking and speaking, but map is not territory, and it is a mistake to confuse one’s concepts with the actual world.

From the critical realist perspective I am developing, this claim that “religion” is only a scholar’s word is doubly misleading. It is misleading in the first place in that the word has a history of employment by monks and theologians and princes outside the academic study of religion.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, this claim is misleading in the second place because religion is not merely a word or a concept, a taxon, or a label. This latter point deserves some discussion.

What is the ontology of social realities? What is the relation between human words and the human world? In my judgment, religion is a social construction, but that social construction is in the first place performed rather than spoken, and as it is performed it transforms bodies.<sup>17</sup> The Thai boy, for instance, is not merely called a monk; he becomes a monk. This religious status—his monkhood—exists not merely because a religious word is used to describe him, not merely because he is seen, so to speak, though the

lens of a religious vocabulary. He embodies this religious status because his hair has been cut in tonsure, because he has been given and wears his robes, because of the creation of the monastery and the arrangements of the finances and laws to support it, because of its Vinaya code and the discipline he takes from it, and because of the boundaries of the sangha as a group distinct from the householders and exclusive of women. In this way one can speak of religious hair, religious clothes, religious buildings, religious behavior, and religious communities as social realities in the world, and one can speak of religion as the abstraction that refers to the set of such things. In these ways, religions are not merely concepts but also inhabited worlds. Analogously, “nations” is the abstract or general sorting term that refers to the set of inhabited worlds or imagined communities that includes Japan, Ireland, and Senegal. As Talal Asad says, “This construct [i.e., the nation] is no less real for being ideological” (Asad 2003: 194). Someone who is committed to a materialist ontology might still insist that only physical things such as laptops or chairs are real, and that words for socially dependent entities such as religions or nations are merely heuristic tools for organizing the physical world.<sup>18</sup> But for the critical realist, a religion is a practice that includes words, and is not solely a word. To say that there are no religions (or that there are no nations) is therefore either false or a misleading way to make a point about the performed nature of social realities.

To say that religion is a social construction is important, because it introduces reflexivity into one’s study. It lets scholars of religion raise the questions of who gets to define what religion is and what purposes their definitions serve. This attention to the history and politics of one’s concepts is what makes a critical realism critical. But to show that a concept is a social construction says nothing about whether or not that concept identifies something real. The concept of “molecule” and “magnetic field” are socially constructed, but this alone does not show that the entities so labeled are chimerical. Or, to take cultural examples, “gender” and “sexism” and even “colonialism” and “imperialism” are social constructions, but nevertheless indicate social realities that exist in the world. This view is what makes critical realism a form of realism.

### **CAN THERE BE RELIGION WITHOUT “RELIGION”?**

There is, however, a problem in the account I am developing. In all of my examples of social facts, the people involved in the practices themselves use the concepts that are at issue. People who are voting for a president understand themselves as participating in an election; pitchers and batters themselves use the term “baseball game.” Similarly, people involved in religious practices today in mosques and temples and churches and gurdwaras understand themselves as practicing religions. For this reason, my argument so far only amounts to this: we can describe a practice as X when the practitioners themselves understand themselves as practicing X. But as many of the critics of “religion” have pointed out, most people in history and around the world who are now said to have practiced religion did not understand themselves that way. The contemporary concept of religion was invented in Europe roughly in the seventeenth century, it is said, and then was spread by European travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators and imposed on the rest of the world. The abolitionist might grant that many today do understand what they do as religion, but might nevertheless insist that there were no religions before that time, or outside that spreading circle of European proselytizing and imperialism. If it is inappropriate to impose a label on someone who does not understand themselves under that description, then it is inappropriate to speak of religion outside modern Europe in China, India, Africa, South America, and so on. In fact, on this view, there were no religions even in Europe before the concept emerged.

Now, it is absolutely true that to identify a human practice under a description not used by the practitioners themselves is unacceptable. There is an obvious confusion in saying that someone is voting when they do not have the concept of an election, or that they are striking out when they do not have the practice of baseball. To identify a practice, or properly to describe it, one must restrict oneself to concepts and beliefs that inform that practice.<sup>19</sup> An action performed by a person is informed by the understanding of that person, and this understanding of the action is what makes it the action that it is. Put philosophically: because practices are intentional behavior, the participants’ self-ascription is normative for identifying the practice. Nevertheless, one can employ the concept of “religion” in ways that are appropriate, even if the people in question themselves do not use the term. Even when the practices so labeled do not include that idea, one can re-describe a practice as religion. I want to develop this idea.

One might think that if the term “religion” is not native, then it will be, by that fact alone, inappropriate to impose it. In order to describe a practice properly, one must be faithful to the concepts that inform it, and to fail to respect the distinctiveness and integrity of the culture under description is a form of “conceptual violence” or “symbolic violence” (Dubuisson; King). There can be little question that people have sought to legitimate physical forms of violence through the use of concepts, not least “religion.” Nevertheless, scholars of religion can employ the concept of religion even when it is not indigenous if they distinguish between the conceptual work of *identifying* a practice and that of *interpreting* it. It is true that one must identify a practice using native terms, for the reason given above. However, once one has identified a practice, it can be fitting and illuminating to interpret or redescribe or translate that practice into non-native terms. In fact, redescribing something in terms not used (or not even known) by the speaker is commonplace. We say, “When he said ‘the lady with the baby,’ he was referring to Maria.” Or: “When you climbed K2, you climbed the second tallest mountain in the world.” To apply this distinction to a religious example: one might identify what certain participants are doing using their own terms, say, as honoring the ancestors. If one then wants to redescribe what they are doing in one’s own terms, in terms that the practitioners do not know, then one is redescribing or interpreting that practice. One is arguing that “honoring the ancestors” is a form of religion. In situations when the term is not known, then, ascriptions of religion are elliptical, in the sense that to say “The people practiced religion” really means: “The people practiced (something that they describe as X but that I would interpret as) religion.” Scholars of religion should recognize that the parenthetical comment is always implied, even when it is not made explicit.

This is the point at which how one defines religion becomes important. For instance, if one defines religion as a kind of social formation (with Russell McCutcheon [1998]), then to interpret honoring the ancestors as religion is to argue that honoring the ancestors is a kind of social formation. In contrast, if one defines religion as experience of the sacred (with Mircea Eliade [1959]), then to interpret honoring the ancestors as religion is to argue that honoring the ancestors is a kind of experience of the sacred. The question for scholars of religion then turns on whether these interpretations of honoring the ancestors fit and illuminate the practice, or whether they distort it. Either is possible. To make this distinction between identifying a practice and interpreting is crucial, I judge, because it highlights the fact that ascriptions of religion in conditions when the word is not used are always a step removed from the description proper. They are paraphrases, elaborations. The term “religion” is being used as a model or a template in order to interpret the phenomena, but as the term is not internal to the practice, misinterpretation is possible. The redescription may fail to fit. Either insiders or outsiders to the practices being interpreted may reject the label. An interpretation is open to challenge as an interpretation and therefore those who interpret, unlike those who describe, have to be able to give reasons in support of their labels. And so the distinction between describing or identifying, on the one hand, and redescribing and interpreting, on the other, opens up a space for challenge and highlights the fact that the meaning of “religion” is not self-evident.

The critics of “religion” might grant all this and still be skeptical. They might question whether the practices redescribed as religion—the pilgrimages, prayers, and sacrifices, and so on—have any *unity* independent of the sorting done by the term. Perhaps, as Ian Hacking has analogously argued about the label “schizophrenia,” the term “religion” gathers disparate social phenomena together in an external and arbitrary way.<sup>20</sup> This is a legitimate worry. The retentionist needs to show that the use of a non-native sorting term is not arbitrary.

Let me illustrate this point with a minimalist (Tylorean) definition of religion as a set of rituals, stories, and institutions connected to belief in superhuman beings. I agree with the critic that it would not be appropriate to lump together the rituals, stories, and institutions from some culture into a set and then call this their “religion,” if these elements are in the eyes of the practitioners themselves unrelated. If these elements are always simply cobbled together by outsiders, then I would agree that it is more accurate to say that there are no religions outside modern European influence. What a retentionist needs to show, therefore, is that the elements in the set are not arbitrary but are instead connected to each other by the practitioners themselves. A retentionist needs to show that there is a structure to these elements that exists independent of the label. That is, if the practitioners themselves relate their rituals to the stories they teach—for instance, they hear the stories as the source or the model or the justification for the rituals—and if the rituals and stories are in turn linked to the institutions, then there is a structure to the

phenomena that antedates the label. Whether some particular rituals are connected to some particular stories and whether rituals or stories are connected to the institutions are not things one can know a priori or declare by fiat; it is a question that would have to be asked in each case. But the retentionist hypothesis is that even if a culture does not have the concept of religion, the connections that constitute the cultural pattern are indigenous and not imposed by the use of the external label. Let me give two examples. If the Nuer tell stories that dramatize what they see as the relationship between ethical lapses and the loss of purity, and they connect these teachings to expiatory sacrifices, and they also connect their story-connected sacrifices to the social roles of the leopard skin priests, then it may be fitting and illuminating to redescribe this complex of teachings and rituals and institutions as Nuer religion, even if the Nuer themselves do not use the term. Similarly, if the Huichol tell stories about the journeys of ancestor spirits, and these journeys are imitated in peyote rituals conducted by a shaman, then it may be fitting and illuminating to redescribe this complex of stories, rituals, and institutions as Huichol religion, even if the Huichol themselves do not use the term. In such cases, the interpreter is claiming two things: (i) that there is a cultural pattern or structure that exists independent of the label of it as a religion and (2) that the label of "religion" fits or illuminates that pattern.

One can therefore distinguish between sets of cultural elements that are arbitrary and those that are kindred. It is inappropriate to impose the label "religion" on a set of cultural elements if they are an arbitrary set. In his discussion of mereology (that is, the study of parts and wholes), Hilary Putnam creates a set that includes his nose and the Eiffel tower, and if a random grouping like that is all that speaking of religion as a set of elements amounts to, then retentionists should let the term go. But if the elements that make up a religion are kin to each other, taught by the participants as an interconnected complex, then it may not be inappropriate to interpret that complex as a religion—even if cultural insiders lack a corresponding term.<sup>21</sup> And to be clear, if one argues that a culture lacking the term religion nevertheless has practices that are aptly interpreted as a religion, she need not be claiming that they are "unconsciously" religious nor that they are "latently" religious, but only that one can legitimately redescribe what they are doing as religious, for one's own purposes, when the label fits. On this approach, people have practiced what many people today call religion without abstracting from that practice in order either to an explicit name to that practice or to develop a common term for their practice as a generic type of which there are others. On this approach, in other words, religions, like dinosaurs and sexism, have existed even without the term.<sup>22</sup>

To sum up my argument to this point, I have argued that one can use the label "religion" if the people so labeled themselves use the term, and that in some cases, one can also use it even if the people so labeled themselves do not use the term, as long as the elements so labeled are kin to each other and one recognizes that one is importing an etic term that redescribes indigenous practices. To mark the difference between these two situations in the study of culture, it may be worth underlining the distinction between the practice of "describing," on the one hand, and "re-describing" or "interpreting," on the other hand. In this context, to describe is to give a practice a name that the practitioners themselves use; thus one is simply describing what they understand themselves to be doing, and one describes a practice as a religion when the practitioners themselves use or import that concept. But when one gives it a name not used by the practitioners themselves, one is re-describing or interpreting their practice. Interpreting involves another level of analogical imagination, and so the interpreter is imposing a label, though this may be a fitting label.

### **"RELIGION" AS DISTORTION**

The second level in the critique of "religion" is that the use of this term typically distorts the cultural phenomena on which it is imposed. Whether or not religion exists in the world, the critics' second, historicist argument is that the term in its modern western sense carries so much conceptual baggage that it is misleading to use it to redescribe other cultural examples. The meaning of the term is derived from and only properly fits its own historically particular situation.

I take this critique seriously. The most important conceptual problems with the concept "religion," in my judgment, are the following. In the first place, nouns carry with them the implication that the reality described is a bounded and even static object. Call this *the problem of reification*. This conceptual

ossification was detailed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued that the history of the word "religion" began with attention to the way that people struggled to live, a living response to a vision, and shifted over time to an abstract and hypostatized noun. Smith points out that the early term *religio* was used to refer not to a cultural entity but to whether a person was pious, faithful, and observant: "What began... as designating a quality of life, eventually came to refer to the formal pattern or outward system of observances in which that quality found expression" (Smith 72).<sup>23</sup> Reification is also problematic because a collective noun homogenizes. The term conceptually gathers together historical realities that are diverse and in process and occludes both the differences between them and the changes within them. With social realities there is also the implication that the reality described is discrete and coherent rather than a contested space in which different groups struggle and negotiate with each other. This process of reification occurs at the level of generalizing about "religion" and then it can occur again at the level of individual religions: the idea of Hinduism, for example, also suggests that there is something ahistorical and monolithic about being Hindu, and the same is true of the labels of "Buddhism," "Christianity," and so on. This opposition to religion thus draws on the widespread philosophical rejection of essentialism.

The second kind of distortion is that the word "religion" distinguishes between religion and the nonreligious aspects of culture. But if "nonreligious" is meant to refer to politics, economics, and other so-called secular aspects of a culture, then this division clearly reflects the modern understanding of the term, epitomized by John Locke and the Constitution of the United States, in which religion is restricted to the private sphere. Call this *the problem of autonomy*. To label something as "religion" implies that it is distinct from those other cultural processes, but, for most of human history, the people who are now called religious did not make these distinctions. Take for example a sacrifice that is offered as part of the installation of a king. It distorts the phenomenon if one classifies the ceremony (the participants involved, the objects used, the social effects of the ritual, or the feelings experienced) as religious-not-political or as political-not-religious. The use of the label "religion" suggests the view of religion found in the modern west where religious and political aspects of culture are treated as distinct spheres. At a minimum, therefore, the use of the word suggests that religion and politics are separate aspects of culture; at worst, it can suggest that religion is isolable, *sui generis*, and irreducible.

The third kind of distortion is that the dominant religion in the west puts great emphasis on internal states of piety, and the term therefore carries with it the sense that what religion refers to is faith or belief understood as a mental state. Call this *the problem of privatization*. Christian practice has long included a central focus on creedal statements, the Reformation and its repudiation of Catholic sacraments, and "works righteousness" underlined this focus on belief even more, and the Enlightenment ideal of a rational faith underlined it still again. Typically, as a consequence, "religion" is implicitly heard or explicitly defined in terms of voluntary belief. This internal focus is also seen if one defines religion as an experience of the sacred, that is, as a distinctive kind of experience that cannot be reduced to social or psychological feelings. In both cases, this focus reflects an especially modern and an especially Christian perspective.

The term "religion" is thus weighted with multiple connotations and these can distort our understanding of what people do and think. Given the inevitability of abstractions for any kind of thinking, however, it seems that there are only two choices. One can develop new terms, a new taxonomic vocabulary, or one can refine the old ones.

If one decides to develop new terms and replace the term "religion," I see two general strategies. One is to develop a "bigger" concept, a concept that is even more inclusive than "religion." A good example of this strategy comes from Daniel Dubuisson who proposes the idea of "cosmographic formation." Unlike "religion," which Dubuisson says is ethnocentric, cosmographic formation is "truly universal" (2003: 90). It connects the formation of a character and a way of life to a vision of the cosmos; it unites "comprehensive ideas of the world" with "the practices, the rules for living, and prescriptions that they imply" (2003: 17). Unlike definitions of religion that include divine beings, this open-ended notion can apply to all cultures. As he says, "This notion can also apply to the cosmographies of atheists, agnostics, and materialists" (2006: 175), and this lets one use it to illuminate Confucianism, communism, Stoicism, and Theravada Buddhism and (I would add) those indigenous traditions that do not imagine a supernatural realm separate from the natural world.



In my judgment, “cosmographic formation” is a useful phrase, because it draws attention to human agents and their purposes and thereby avoids the suggestion that the process of formation is reified, autonomous, or private. Dubuisson’s term also undermines the near-automatic assumption that religions are inherently moral, pious, or spiritual. I limit my critical discussion of this proposal to one point.<sup>24</sup> Dubuisson claims that “religion” is a parochial idea, local to and indeed definitive of the Christian West, but that his idea of “cosmographic formation” is better, because it is “less European” (2003: 90). This is dubious. The notion of cosmographic formation is made of two elements, the idea that all things can be imagined as a totality (*kosmos*) and the practice of writing (*graphein*), both of Greek origin and both of which have been widely used as the markers of European superiority to non-European cultures. But the true parent of Dubuisson’s idea is Immanuel Kant. Kant holds that all human beings construct a world through the categories of their understanding. Dubuisson is clear about his respect for Kant’s first critique and how it informs his own work: Kant’s distinction between the world in experience and the world in itself shows us how one can speak of the cosmos without speaking of the world as it is in itself (Dubuisson 2006: 169). In brief, for Dubuisson, Kant’s turn to the subject shows how the study of the comprehensive ideas can eschew metaphysics. But this claim—that the study of different views of reality should follow Kant in the sense that it should presuppose that pre-modern and non-western cosmographers were always confused when they believed that they were describing the nature of things—hardly seems less ethnocentric than the more philosophically neutral term “religion.” Kant’s project is a quintessential part of the European Enlightenment. Kant is perhaps the strongest representative of modernity in the West (Lincoln 2003: 2). Phenomenology, existentialism, critical thought, deconstruction, all grow from Kantian soil. In this way, it is hard to imagine a *more* European concept. And so Dubuisson’s proposal, though pedagogically valuable for its ability to unsettle entrenched ideas, seems just as ethnocentric as the term it is supposed to replace.

The other strategy for replacing the term “religion” is to develop concepts that are “smaller”—that is, more particular and less inclusive—than “religion.”<sup>25</sup> One example of this strategy is the proposal of Timothy Fitzgerald, who breaks the concept of religion down into three elements: ritual, politics, and soteriology (2000: chap. 6). Ritual refers to standardized actions (195), politics to the different means for the legitimation of power, and soteriology to a release from life’s ills, in either this-worldly or other-worldly terms. Fitzgerald claims that these three categories let us analyze contemporary Indian Buddhism, for example, in greater specificity than the fuzzy and over-determined word “religion.” And, as with Dubuisson, the terms he has chosen do not suggest that what is being analyzed is a reified object, autonomous from political struggles, or an internal mental state. Of course, other approaches to the study of religion also break the concept of religion down into constituent elements: Ninian Smart famously analyzes the seven dimensions of religion (Smart 1999), and this process is central to every “family resemblance” approach to religion. But what is distinctive about Fitzgerald’s deflationary approach is his argument that the more specific terms substitute for *religion* so adequately that that the term “religion” can be dropped. His argument is that there is nothing to religion over and above ritual, politics, and soteriology. In fact, he says, the invention of the term “religion” is precisely what mystifies the phenomena one is seeking to analyze.

I limit my critical discussion to one point.<sup>26</sup> There will be some cultural phenomena that do not include all three of the elements Fitzgerald focuses on. A birthday party, for instance, may involve ritual but have little or no political or soteriological significance. A local election may be analyzed as both political and ritual but not soteriological. Yet, there will be some aspects of a culture that are so semantically rich that they combine all three, the ritual, the political, and the soteriological. The movements, events, institutions, behavior, or traditions that combine all three will be aspects of a culture that are especially complex. Two well-known examples include the Babylonian New Year (Akitu) festival and the Lakota ghost dance. What label should scholars give to phenomena like these that combine ritual, politics, and soteriology? Any answer to this question reintroduces “religion” or an equivalent. There seems to be a conceptual need not only for the small, particular, local terms but also for generalized abstractions, for the imagined whole of which the small terms are parts. Fitzgerald recognizes this, I believe, but he considers “religion” too distorting, and therefore proposes the word “culture.” But this answer returns us to the previous strategy of more inclusive terms and, with its close ties to the idea of civilization and its employment in distinctions between high and low culture, the word “culture” is no more politically innocent than the word “religion.”

Both the more inclusive and the more particular replacement strategies therefore seem to become entangled in the fact that no language is pure.

If replacement terms become mired in the same conceptual and ideological problems that bedevil “religion,” and one therefore chooses to retain the term, then one still needs to confront the problems of reification, autonomy, and privatization. The problem of the semantic drag of “religion” is real, and those who retain the term have to recognize and combat the entrenched view of religion. They have to make it clear— perhaps especially to themselves—what parts of the term’s semantic history they endorse and what parts they are rejecting.

But at least they are not alone. This process of trying to stretch the word “religion” to include new meanings and of trying to excise unwanted meanings is not new. Anthropologists and historians have long been central in the evolution of the word away from its Protestant roots. Those who use the label “religion” have to make it clear that a set of practices and beliefs may be a religion not only if it lacks a belief in God, a Bible, or a Sabbath, but also, more radically, even if it has not been articulated as a system, does not have a distinct community, makes dances more central to membership than creeds, and is inseparable from the public life of the culture. To combat the problem of autonomy, with its assumption that religion and politics are independent, one can make it clear, with Bruce Lincoln, that religion has both minimalist forms that seek to separate church and state and maximalist forms in which religion is used to ground ethical, aesthetic, and political values (2003: chap. 4). To combat the problem of privatization, with its assumption that religions are a matter of interior beliefs, one can make it clear, with José Casanova, that religion has both personal and intellectualist forms and, increasingly, social and public forms (1994). And to combat the problem of reification, with its assumption that a religion is a holistic entity, one can specify that religions exist on a spectrum from unsystematized set of practices and beliefs that are diffuse in a culture to a systematized theology with a distinct religious community. Religion may not be a structure as much as a space of contestation between different constituencies who use the stories, rituals, and institutions that mark off that space as tools to establish their own norms as the authoritative ones. In fact, those who continue to use the label “religion” should clarify that something may be a religion without a name, and therefore may not exist in the minds of its practitioners as an entity separate from the rest of the culture.

### **THE IDEOLOGY OF “RELIGION”**

The third level of the abolitionists’ critique is that the term “religion” is part of an orientalist and colonialist program and therefore ideologically poisonous. The abolitionists argue that the invention of the term in the Enlightenment was not an innocent neologism but was politically motivated as Europeans sought a justification for imperialism. One response to this argument is that the original use of a word does not determine its future use. To conflate the origin of the term with its applicability is the genetic fallacy (Segal 2005). Another response is that discourses of power can always be reappropriated and put to the service of subversive interests. The same is true of the discourse of “religion” (Kellison Unpublished). Both of these responses are sound. But in this closing section of this paper, I want to develop a critical realist response to the root question of the relation between ideological interests and descriptions of reality. My goal is to keep in mind the critics’ awareness that religion is a social construction without giving up the possibility that the thing to which the term refers nevertheless exists.

There is no denying that our concepts are the products of our interests. But this does not settle the question about whether the concepts correspond to the world. Let me apply this observation to the invention of “religion.” It is true that one’s interests lead one to notice certain facts about the world, and to label them, whereas those with other interests may overlook or ignore these states of affairs. Perception itself is driven by interest. In broad strokes, then, a critical realist account of “religion” would be that the Reformation led Europeans to notice or realize that there were structural and functional similarities between the beliefs and practices of the different Protestant and Catholic churches. Given this perception, Zwingli and Calvin (but not Luther) took the term “religion” and began to stretch it so that it might serve as a type of which there could be more than one token. This new conceptual tool served the polemical purpose of distinguishing between the authentic piety of the reformers and the spurious piety of the Roman Church. Subsequently, the enormous growth of information about the diversity of cultures around the world in the age of colonialism led Europeans to notice or realize that non-European cultures had

elements functionally or structurally analogous to what were now called European religions. Given that perception, Herbert of Cherbury and the Enlightenment *philosophes* stretched the word “religion” again to broaden it further, first to seek to include non-Christian and later to include non-theistic types (Harrison). This development served the polemical purpose of distinguishing the so-called natural religion of the *philosophes* from the so-called revealed religions of those around the world deceived by priestcraft.<sup>27</sup>

An account of “religion” like this one focuses on the interaction between self-interested perceptions of the world and the ideologically driven history of the concept. My critical realism therefore does not deny that “religion” is a product of the European *imaginaire*, nor does it claim that the term is ideologically innocent. On the contrary, it foregrounds the issue of the historical context and the purposes of those who developed the terms. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the word is substantively empty or refers to nothing.

One can imagine the reasoning that leads the critics to this deflationary claim. What “religion” means shifts according to the ideological interests of those using the term. What Zwingli refers to with the term differs from what Herbert refers to, which differs again from what Tillich refers to. This seems like evidence that “religion” is simply an ideological marker and that religion (without the scare quotes) is not a reality but the product of the way the world is described. The label apparently gets applied not because the term corresponds to something that “is” religion, but because it is in the interests of those who apply the term. On this view, it seems that, as Russell McCutcheon argues, the study of religion might better understand itself not as the study of a real thing but as the investigation into who gets to decide what counts as religion, that is, not as the investigation of rituals, stories, and institutions connected to belief in superhuman beings but rather as the study of a disciplinary concept (McCutcheon 2001). On this account, there is no fact of the matter concerning what religion really is. When one follows this line, the ideological critique of religion blocks the ontological question about what kind of thing religion “is.”

The deconstructive idea that facts about the world are *created* by how one describes the world may lead the critic of “religion” to argue that, outside of language, there are no religions.<sup>28</sup> It is crucial to a critical realist account to distinguish between this deconstructive idea (which he does not accept) and the very different idea that which descriptions of the world are accepted depends upon one’s interests (which he can).<sup>29</sup> One can endorse the latter without in any way accepting the former. It is true that “religion” is a modern and European and Christian word and that it has been imposed on other cultures. But labels for religions presuppose a certain conceptual distance. It is not unusual that labels are created by outsiders. “Hinduism” may be an invention of Muslims. “Confucianism” may be an invention of the Jesuits. “Shinto” can arise as the Chinese word for the religion of Japan. The *philosophes* distinguished “revealed religions” that claimed revelation from “natural religion” based on reason. William James invented labels for “healthy-minded” and “sick-souled” religions. “Civil religions” is a label created by Robert Bellah. Today, scholars debate the appropriateness of “fundamentalism” as a sorting word. Perhaps, all of these terms for categorizing human beliefs and practices were created to label other people’s practices. Does this make them inadmissible? Often, insiders then adopt the labels to describe themselves. Does that then make them acceptable?

The view I am arguing for in this paper is different: there are innumerable ways that any cultural phenomenon can be described. When one sees the world a certain way, one develops a label to mark that part of the world as such, uses that label, and recommends its use. The label reflects the purpose of the labeler. When it comes to religions, often (perhaps even typically) the labels for groups have been deprecatory or pejorative. But this does not mean that the labels do not correspond to distinctions in how people are living. This is complicated by the fact that all of the terms being discussed—such as “religion” and “Hinduism” and “healthy-minded”—are “interactive kinds” in the sense that once they are connected they can be picked up and embraced by those so described (see Hacking). With social realities, if people find the term useful and live in its terms, this agreement is all that is needed for the alleged thing to exist. To recall the quote from Talal Asad, “This construct is no less real for being ideological” (Asad 2003: 194).

Some of the critics have emphasized that the word “religion” is inevitably a Christian concept. They often claim that the term is covertly theological or ecumenical, and that their critique of the term is part of a

naturalistic, non-theological approach to the study of cultures. But I find the critics confused about the relation between their critique and Christian theology. Presumably, according to the critics, theologians or theologically inspired scholars want the concept of “religion” in order to flatten differences between various ways of life and to suggest that the members of every culture have the same spiritual needs or the same contact with the transcendent. But the truth is that plenty of contemporary theologians welcome the critique of “religion.” This is as true of conservative theologians like Karl Barth and Paul Griffiths as it is of liberal theologians like John Hick and John Thatamanil. Griffiths endorses the critique because if there is no way to distinguish between a religion and a secular ideology, as Fitzgerald puts it (Fitzgerald 1997: x), then there is no way to distinguish between theological and secular theorizing, and so there are no grounds for excluding theology from the public sphere or from the academy (Griffiths 2000). And John Hick wrote the laudatory foreword to Smith (1962) expressly to oppose the essentialism and reification of religion as a modern and distorting western view. In my judgment, the critique of “religion” can at the least be perfectly put to theological or ecumenical use. At the most, the critique of “religion” is simply part of theology in its postmodern incarnation.

I write this paper with ambivalence. I agree with the critics that the concept “religion” is not innocent. The concept of religion was used and is still used to classify and judge as inferior cultures other than the dominant ideology of the modern west. And that means that I am implicated in this discussion: the concept of religion was used and is still used to classify and judge as inferior cultures other than my own. But, as suggested above, there are no terms whose history or implications are free of politics. None of our thinking is without ideological baggage. None of our perspectives are neutral. There is no way to study what we now call religious rituals, stories, experiences, institutions, and so on, without the acts of classification that make possible value judgments between cultures. This is why I argue for retaining the word “religion,” though now conscious of the shadows it casts.

## NOTES

1 I have in mind especially the following: Smith (1962, 1982, 1998), Asad (1993), Balangadhara (1994), McCutcheon (1997, 2001), Fitzgerald (1997, 2000, 2007a, 2007b), Arnal (2000), Dubuisson (2003) and Webb (2009). Masuzawa (2005) critiques the related idea of “world religions.” Insightful discussions of the issue can also be found in Wax (1984), Wilson (1998), and King (1999).

2 Though the critics of “religion” do not embrace the entirety of Derrida’s project, McCutcheon points out that his critique of the *sui generis* concept of religion resembles Derrida’s deconstructive method in that, in Derrida’s words, it “reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being what they are, their effects on what follows them, and that the starting point is not a given but a construct, usually blind to itself” (McCutcheon 1997: 73, quoting Derrida 1981: xv). Arnal and Fitzgerald likewise recommend the deconstruction of “religion” (Arnal 2000: 30; Fitzgerald 2000: 12, 245; 2007a: 8, 14).

3 I want to build the argument of this paper without elaborate philosophical assumptions, and I think that by “critical realism” I do not need any more than I state in the sentence in the text. Nevertheless, behind my use is Roy Bhaskar’s view of inquiry that distinguishes between one’s “transitive” cognitive materials and the “intransitive” reality those materials let one investigate. On his critical realist account, one’s intellectual relationships to the world (including one’s theorizing about religion) are socially mediated, but not socially determined. For an introduction to this approach, see Bhaskar (1989) or Collier (1994); for the classical statement, see Bhaskar (1975).

4 This view is shared by all the works cited in footnote 1.

5 For example, Balangadhara argues that the concept *religion* distorts the traditions of India (1994); Fitzgerald that it distorts Buddhism, Hinduism, and—his best example—Shinto (Fitzgerald 2000: Parts II-III); and Asad that it distorts Islam and medieval Christianity (Asad 1993).

6 One often sees this point made in what I label *the disparate list argument*, in which the critic lists a panoply of allegedly religious phenomena and then asks rhetorically: what could the items on such a list have in common? As an example, Dubuisson writes, “The trance of a participant in a voodoo ceremony, a Benedictine monk praying in his cell, a Brahman bathing in the Ganges, a Christian’s examination of his conscience before confession, the butchered victim of an Aztec sacrifice, the conclusions of a canonization process, a Byzantine icon, the prayer wheel of a Tibetan pilgrim, the myth of Oedipus, the pope’s ban on contraception, the cabbalistic exegesis of a verse of Scripture, the solitary practice of yoga by a devotee of Shiva, an extract from Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the morning breathing exercises of a Taoist master, peasants’ midsummer festival and bonfire, the personality cult devoted to the emperor of China, a Roman seer reading the future in the entrails of a dead bird, a pilgrim in Mecca, the Buddhist expression *sarvam duhkham*, ‘all is suffering,’ the cosmogony outlined in Plato’s *Timaeus*, the symbolism of the Sacré Coeur cathedral, the collective suicide of the members of the Order of the Solar Temple, the genealogical list of Egyptian pharaohs, the gnosis of the Upanishads... Can we identify a common denominator...?” (Dubuisson 40-41; cf. 24, 28-29, 44, 205).

7 See especially Asad (1993) and McCutcheon (1997).

8 Most of the historians considered here see the shift to understanding religion as a set of beliefs as a joint product of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Harrison (1990: 61-73) and Smith (1962: 40) both point at Herbert of Cherbury as emblematic; see also Dubuisson on the process of “interiorization” (2003: 110).

9 On the construction of the concept *religion* as an ideological tool useful for European imperialism and the spread of capitalism, see especially McCutcheon (1997: chaps. 1 and 6) and Fitzgerald (2000, 2007a, 2007b).

10 Hacking also recognizes a more radical position, “revolutionary” social constructionists, who actually seek to change the world to eliminate the pernicious social construction—in this case, religion. The abolitionists considered here in contrast are “rebellious” because their recommendations remain within the domain of ideas.

11 Arnal (2000: 32), Webb (2009: 35) and Fitzgerald (1997: x). Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith: “there is no such entity... In any case, the use of a plural, or with an article, is false” (326, 194; cf. 144). Gary Lease: “there is no religion” (quoted in McCutcheon 1998: 61 fn 31).

12 In my account of the ontology of religion, I draw on some of the ideas of Searle (1995). For an account of the ontology of religion that complements this one but does not use Searle, see Stowers (2008).

13 Searle notes that, of course, the English sentences describing these facts are socially dependent, but the stated facts are not.

14 Smith (1982: xi); see also Smith (1998). Smith’s dictum that “map is not territory - but maps are all we possess” (1993: 309) also suggests that the reality to which scholars worlds refer is either nonexistent or unavailable because noumenal.

15 Also, “the notion of myth, ritual, and even religion do not refer to real things in the human environment; they are, instead, comparative categories of our making. . . part of our scholarly toolbox” (2001: 63).

16 Peterson and Walhof detail a variety of ways in which “inventing religion was never purely an academic project. Creating, redefining, and standardizing religion has long been a political strategy linked to the making of national identities and the exercise of colonial power” (2002: 1). The essays in Fitzgerald (2007a) make the same argument (see explicitly 2007a: 10-11).

17 Given the influence of Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, and others, this idea of the body as a socially informed or culturally inscribed representation is perhaps the reigning paradigm in cultural studies, though I am persuaded by the work of Thomas Csordas that a more adequate account of embodiment should complement this idea with the idea of the body as also the intersubjective ground of experience (see Csordas 1994, 1999; Schilbrack 2004).

18 McCutcheon has said that “Although I would be the last to suggest that such things as ‘society’ or the ‘nation-state’ were real in the same way that my laptop, or the chair I’m now sitting in, are real, unlike the humanist or theologian, I see ‘society’ ‘economy,’ and ‘the nation-state’ - not to mention ‘God,’ ‘sin,’ or ‘heaven’ - as *analytically or heuristically useful, everyday fictions* that people in certain groups use to organize and negotiate the complex world around them” (2003: 150).

19 To fail to do this is the error that Wayne Proudfoot labels “descriptive reductionism” (Proudfoot 1985: chap. 6). To avoid that error, Proudfoot draws this rule: “In identifying the experience, emotion, or practice of another, I must restrict myself to concepts and beliefs that have informed his experience. I cannot ascribe to him concepts he would not recognize or beliefs he would not acknowledge” (193).

20 Dubuisson makes this argument: “the ordinary definition [of the word ‘religion’ refers to] a complex set of distinct elements and conceivable relationships. The fact that it may be possible to find elsewhere, in other cultures and in an isolated state, one or other element that is comparable to one of those contained in the western system in no way authorizes us to infer the existence of the structure itself” (13).

21 The sociologist Martin Reisebrodt makes an important argument that when one turns attention from the natives’ language to their actions, one sees that cultures which lack the explicit word “religion” can nevertheless act with the implicit concept. That is, cultures distinguish (what others call) their religious activities from their nonreligious activities, their religious specialists from their nonreligious specialists, and so on. Moreover, even without the word, religious traditions have perceived other religions as rivals, debating them, polemicizing against them, and appropriating their sacred places. And religiously heterogeneous empires have developed a “politics of religion” that recognizes and seeks to manage the different traditions. Reisebrodt concludes that “the distinction between religious and nonreligious is lacking neither in the premodern west nor in non-Western cultures, and the religious in the sense of institutions that are associated with superhuman powers has existed in all ages and cultures” (Reisebrodt 2010: 1).

22 Wilfred Cantwell Smith: “in some ways, it is probably easier to be religious without the concept” (Smith 19).

23 Smith summarizes: “We have here a recapitulation of a standard gradual process of reification: the preaching of a vision, the emergence of followers, the organization of a community, the positing of an intellectual ideal of that community, the definition of the actual pattern of its institutions. The last two steps seem to have been taken only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. . . . Here, then, is a process of institutionalization, of conceptual reification. Concepts, terminology, and attention shift from personal orientation to an ideal, then to an abstraction, finally to an institution” (Smith 1962: 67, 76).

24 For a critical discussion of Dubuisson’s project, see the Review Symposium in *Religion* 36 (2006: 119-178).

25 Asad writes, “The anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as ‘religion’ into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character” (1993: 54).

26 For a critical reading of Fitzgerald’s project, see Schilbrack (forthcoming).

27 Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes the novelty of the Enlightenment neologism wryly: “no one before the eighteenth century believed that what was revealed was a religion” (41).

28 As Dubuisson puts this linguistic determinism, “our language is also our world” (31).

29 Boghossian distinguishes between these two views clearly and labels them the “description dependence of facts” and the “social relativity of descriptions” (Boghossian 2006).

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