

Studying Religion

an introduction

Russell T. McCutcheon

While many entry-level resources concentrate on providing detailed descriptions of the world's religions, *Studying Religion* turns its attention from the data of religion to the analytic skills required of anyone interested in studying the behaviors and institutions that we commonly name as religions. It shifts the focus from describing the exotic or curious religious "Other" to examining scholarly practice itself, and persuades readers that prior attention to their own habits will assist their efforts to study the habits of others.

Although this little book can be used as part of an introductory course (when supplemented by ethnographic materials of the instructor's choosing), and is accessible to interested readers outside the university, it will also be of use in any course in the study of religion. For, despite the topic under study, the same intellectual skills are required to isolate, name, and examine within a comparative context, those collections of human artifacts that strike students as deserving attention. *Studying Religion* will assist instructors across the academic study of religion to 'set the table' with the descriptive and comparative methods, as well as explanatory theories, on which scholars routinely draw in carrying out their work.

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This book is dedicated to my oldest sister, who always told me that I should write something for non-specialists (or, as she phrased it, people like her) to read. Apart from editing an anthology intended for the classroom, all of my publishing has been directed at a specialized audience. After all, given that most of my work has so far been concerned with the history of this one academic field, I can't imagine many people other than scholars of religion reading it – and even among scholars of religion, few seem interested in examining the shape of the field itself, preferring instead to immerse themselves in the study of this or that myth, ritual, or institution. Given that I've not written all that much for the novice, I'm not really sure that this is the book my sister had in mind, but I do know that it's surely closer than anything else I've written. So this one's for Ingrid.

Introduction: What is the Study of Religion?

When we say we're studying religion, what is it in the world of human actions that we're talking about? This is a question scholars of religion must ask themselves, right from the start of their studies. For if scholars, like the people whom they study, presume that their word 'religion' refers to something outside of the world of human actions – something that apparently existed well before, and will long outlast, such actions – then how can one even talk about such things? So just what do scholars mean when they say something is 'religious'?

As a way of offering an answer to this question, imagine the following situation, which is likely so ordinary that it will strike you as uninteresting: You walk into a dark room and fumble for the light switch on the wall; finding it, you casually flick it on as you enter the room – but nothing happens. Surprised that you're still in the dark, you quickly flick it back and forth a few more times, much like people who impatiently push the 'Close Door' button on elevators, as if that'll help. But still, nothing happens. With one hand still on the switch, you peer into the darkness, to where you think the light is on the ceiling. 'The bulb's burnt out', you mutter to yourself, as you wonder if you've got any spare bulbs in the cupboard.

Although scholars are often accused of making simple things overly (and unnecessarily) complicated, I think it worthwhile to consider what is going on in this example of routine, day-to-day behavior – an example so mundane that it might strike us as silly to examine it in greater detail.

Based on countless past experiences of walking into dark rooms, as well as rather rudimentary beliefs about such things as electricity, electrical wiring, and a hunch we have about the average lifetime of filaments inside light bulbs, we routinely infer a relationship between a wall switch and a ceiling bulb – an **inference** that usually matches reality so closely that we never think twice about whether flicking the switch has an effect on the bulb overhead. In fact, I'd hazard a guess and say that the person walking into the dark room does not even consciously *believe* that the switch is connected to the bulb, if by 'believe' we mean that they subscribe to a series of principles or propositions that posit a relationship between the switch on the wall and the light overhead. Instead of seeing their belief about the light as a conclusion reached by means of a systematic set of rational processes, or even a bold conjecture that predicts some future state of affairs based on one's past experiences, we might understand it more as a form of unreflective behavior. Much like walking through a open doorway without first stopping to form a well-grounded hypothesis concerning the likelihood that it is in fact an open physical space through which physical objects might pass, reaching for the light switch in a dark room is more than likely not a conscious, **intentional** activity.

As should be evident from this brief discussion of a failed attempt to illuminate the darkness, reality does not necessarily match our expectations, no matter how reasonable those expectations may seem to us. Birds regularly fly into clean windows, intelligent people walk straight into patio screen doors, and sometimes we're left in the dark when the light bulb burns out. Surprises (and sometimes bruises) result when reality does not match our expectations; learning to become curious about the

surprises (and curious about why we were surprised in the first place) is perhaps the first step toward becoming a scholar.

Apart from being a practical illustration of how familiar patterns of human behavior do not always match the way the world seems to operate, there is more that we can draw from this simple example of the light bulb. Consider the conclusion we reached concerning the bulb being burned out. Having changed a number of light bulbs in my time, it seems pretty reasonable to infer that the filament has burned out when it finally dawns on us that repeatedly flicking the switch up and down causes nothing to happen. So I'll unscrew it, see if it is blackened, and without even thinking I'll give it a little shake beside my ear to listen for the sound made by the damaged filament, all to confirm my conclusion. If the light still doesn't work after replacing the bulb, I'll likely hold the new bulb close to my ear and give it a shake as well – after all, bulbs, like eggs, don't always make it home from the store in one piece. If the new bulb seems fine, yet still nothing works, I'll start doing some additional problem solving; I'll hunt for a flashlight and find the circuit breakers; I'll wonder about the switch being broken, or whether the wiring itself is having troubles; maybe I'll try some other switches in the house, in other rooms, to see if the power is off all over the house. Perhaps I should go next door and see if the neighbor also has no power. Should I call the electric company to see what's up? Can I afford an electrician?

In the midst of all this, I think most readers would agree that it is highly unlikely that the person left in the dark will conclude that one or more powerful, invisible **agents** had infiltrated their home's electrical system. Not that this is a silly conclusion to draw – far from it. Instead, given the way many of us usually go about problem-solving, it is a highly curious conclusion to draw – or at least it is curious when people do and when they do not make this rather bold conjecture. For there are indeed times in people's lives when they find it completely sensible to conclude just that – that their daily, practical behaviors have little or no consequence to bring about some desired state of affairs; instead, they turn to a series of specific behaviors intended to effect the world at large through the actions of other agents we could call spirits, ancestors or gods.

But why?

Anyone who has owned an old, temperamental car might know exactly what I'm talking about. Those who have the good fortune of driving a new car probably don't think twice about turning the key and driving away. Much like the presumed connection between the switch and the bulb, they go about their daily lives acting as if there is some **necessary** connection between a turn of a car key and the *vroom* of the engine. But not everyone can afford – literally, afford – to have such confidence in

their assumptions about the world. Instead, those of us who drive old cars know all too well that inserting the key into the ignition, and then giving it a turn, does not necessarily result in anything whatsoever. To help bridge the gap between the hoped-for outcome and the unpredictable actual state of affairs, such people sometimes develop little habits, like crossing their fingers before trying the ignition, pumping the gas a specified number of times before trying the key, or treating the car as if it was alive, like an old friend of mine in high school who treated his car like a horse, petting the dashboard and revving the engine while saying 'Whoa' – as if it was a feisty, maybe even cranky, young maverick (or old mare?) with a mind of its own (comprising an instance of what we call **anthropomorphism**).

Of course he knew that the car was not alive, at least not in the way you and I imagine ourselves to be alive and to be agents able to accomplish things in the world. But treating it as if it was, as if petting the dashboard had some connection to the outcome of turning the key and cranking the engine, somehow seemed to help. Whether it helped the car to start or, instead, helped him to deal with the anxiety of never really knowing the outcome of his actions (a common theory concerning the psychological function of **ritual**), is, of course, the question that the curious among us will want to ask and for which they'll try to develop answers.

Those readers interested in getting on with the business of describing the ins and outs of the world's religions are likely a little frustrated by now, wondering what all this has to do with the topic at hand. Why start out by talking about burnt light bulbs, walking into screen doors, and starting-up decrepit old cars, when we could just get on with the business of describing ancient **Hindu myths**, studying **Buddhist rituals**, and learning more about **Jewish holidays**?

If that's what you're after, then this is likely not the book for you; instead, you're recommended to find a world religions website, dictionary or textbook – an easy search since both the web and the book market are flooded with them. Because you'll find what you're after in those resources, there's no need to offer yet another descriptive compilation of the whos, whens, wheres and hows of those things we call religions. Instead, this little book is intended for people who find it curious that, no matter how religious (whatever that word may end up meaning) an auto mechanic is, more than likely he or she first checks the spark plugs and wiggles the wires, and doesn't necessarily start by praying over the car, to get the engine idling the right way (though the car's owner might say a little prayer before the bill for the parts and labor appears).

But more than this, this book is also intended for those who find it curious that some people even name one element of human behavior as '**religion**', in the first place, as if it were somehow identifiably distinct from other elements of daily life (the domain we sometimes call **culture** or **history**). For, prior to describing how, and then developing a **theory** concerning why, people are religious, we need to consider why we ought to collect up and name certain human behaviors as religious. Case in point: precisely how do we know that Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism are things that a scholar of religion ought to study?

For instance, consider a recent case that may be well known to people in the region of the US in which I live and work: several years ago the Chief Justice of the state of Alabama's Supreme Court – the highest judicial authority in the state – used private funds to have a two and a half ton granite monument depicting the Ten Commandments as an open book (also bearing inscribed quotations from a number of widely recognized historical influences on the US legal system) built and then erected one night in the lobby of the state's Supreme Court Offices. Given the long, contested nature of **Church and State** issues in the US, his action, followed by his refusal to have the monument removed, resulted in a series of law suits, none of which Chief Justice Roy Moore won, despite his arguments that he was merely following the state's Constitution, which he, inasmuch as he held the office that he did, had sworn to uphold. In the spring of 2004 he was removed from his office for defying a court order to remove the monument, and, on August 23, 2003, the monument was forcibly removed from the lobby (but it then went on a national tour of the US and Justice Moore went on to mount an unsuccessful bid to unseat the state's current Republican Governor).

Question: is this a religious news story or a political one? Neither? A little bit of both? If so, which part of the story is which? If you were a newspaper editor the answer to this question of classification would have practical ramifications, determining on which page, and in which section, you would run the story. Would you feature it on the front page, amidst the day's most pressing political and economic news, or would you run it on the back pages, among the various ads for local worship services? Your decision could then influence how seriously people took the issue – after all, they likely won't know about it if you bury it on the back pages. And if no one knows about it, then, much as with the proverbial tree falling in the lonely forest, it might as well not even have taken place. Moreover, if you featured it prominently on page one, would it be there because this obviously religious news story had political implications (assuming, perhaps, that religion is a private matter that sometimes makes its way into the public sphere) or because the story was political through and through

(and even calling the Judge's motives 'religious' was a tactical move meant to score points with a portion of the voting public)? Depending which of these options you selected, you will have likely taken a stand on a variety of fairly complex questions, such as: Is religion a unique domain, separate from culture? If so, does religion influence culture? Does culture influence – perhaps even cause – religion? Are they separate domains that ought never to interact? Just what is religion?

Sometimes people pray to gods or call upon the ancestors and, sometimes, they just replace the light bulb; sometimes references to powerful, invisible beings is considered a sincere, personal statement of **faith** and, sometimes it is heard as a sly rhetorical move doing otherwise unseen political work. Investigating why one results as opposed to the other is what the academic study of religion is all about. So, if you happen to be curious not just about the descriptive when and who and how and where but also about the explanatory why of these behaviors, along with a curiosity over how and why we use the term 'religion', then studying religion might be for you.

1 What's in a Name?

Readers beware: this opening chapter is not about religion. Come to think of it, despite what many readers might think, neither are all of the other chapters. Instead, they are about some of the issues involved in defining an object of study – whatever that object of study may be. Although in our case it happens to be a collection of beliefs, behaviors, and institutions that many people know by the name 'religion', one would think that insights derived from examining how definition works elsewhere would pay off in our field as well.

Before one can study religion, one had better figure out who uses the word (and who does not) and what we, as scholars, mean by it. Does it refer to some real thing out there in the world? Does it refer to something deep inside the human heart? Or is it just a tool some of us use to name parts of the world that we happen to find curious? Just what does it mean to define something as a something?

To start to offer some answers to these questions, consider the following case...

In March of 1856 Andrew Scott Waugh wrote a letter. Twenty-four years prior to this he had joined the team of British surveyors who were carrying out what was then called the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. Eventually, he became the Surveyor-General in charge of this massive project. But in 1856, having just completed the survey, he wrote a letter to Captain H. L. Thuillier, Britain's Deputy Surveyor-General of India, who was stationed in the city of Calcutta, on the shores of the Ganges River in northeastern India, near the Bay of Bengal. The contents of Waugh's letter were then communicated to London and eventually reached the desk of not only the Royal Geographical Society, which had been monitoring the progress of the survey, but also the British Secretary for the State of India. In his letter, Waugh addressed what up until that time the surveyors had simply named 'Peak 15', a rather tall mountain in the Himalayas, in the region of the world known as Nepal, bordering what was once known as Tibet to the north, but which is today considered by many (though, of course, not all) as part of the People's Republic of China. Among the work carried out was measuring the depths of all of its valleys and the height of all of its mountains. By 1856 it was clear to Waugh that Peak 15 was indeed the highest mountain as yet discovered in the world and he intended to honor his predecessor, the man who began the Great Trigonometrical Survey in the earliest years of the nineteenth century, by naming Peak 15 after him.

In making his recommendation to rename Peak 15, Waugh acknowledged that 'I was taught by my respected chief and predecessor...to assign to every geographical object its true local or native appellation'. Despite assuring his reader that he had always followed this rule in the past, his letter went on to say that what the surveyors simply named Peak 15 was 'without local name that we can discover, whose native appellation, if it has any, will not likely be ascertained before we are allowed to penetrate into Nepal and to approach close to this stupendous snowy mass... In the meantime the privilege as well as the duty devolves on me to assign to this lofty pinnacle of our globe a name whereby it may be known among geographers and become a household word among civilized nations'. In honor of his onetime chief, the man who began the

Great Trigonometric Survey of India so many years before, Waugh suggested that this 'stupendous snowy mass' be named after Colonel George Everest (1790–1866). He therefore christened it with the French designation 'Mont Everest', a suggestion soon changed by Waugh to 'Mount Everest'. And, as almost anyone can tell you today, the name has stuck.

You may be wondering what this 150-year-old story about the naming of a mountain half a world away has to do with our topic. It certainly is not because I wish to sing the praises of British colonialists who surveyed India – though, to be honest, given the fact that they measured the mountain to within 33 feet of modern surveys that place it at 29,035 feet (or 8,850 meters), such praise would not be out of place, especially considering the perils associated with their work. Neither am I citing this example to illustrate how such things as measurements are not as objective and as factual as they might at first appear – though that would be a handy way to use this example, especially taking into account that when we say 'Mount Everest is 29,035 feet tall' we need to know that this measurement is in fact the expression of a relationship between two points, the peak's tip and sea level; what's more, we also need to know whether high tide or low tide is what counts as 'sea level' (for example, back in 1802, when the Great Survey began, the high water mark was used as the standard, though later the mid-point between high and low tides was taken as the baseline for 'sea level'). And I am not citing this example simply because Mount Everest has recently been in the news quite a lot, since May 29, 2003 marked the 50th anniversary of the peak being climbed by the New Zealander, Edmund Hillary, and his Sherpa partner, Tenzing Norgay – though the way in which their 1953 ascent was popularized in some parts of the world certainly has helped to create our modern view of the mountain's mystery and majesty. No, the reason I use this example is to put squarely before readers the problem of naming and the issues involved when we set out to define things. For this story sets the stage rather nicely for us to consider the role classification plays in enabling us to know and act in the world around us – whether we are classifying mountains, vegetables, citizens, cultures, or those things some of us call religions.

Before moving on to examine the issues involved in defining and thereby studying religion, let's re-consider this example of naming a mountain. Although it is pretty difficult to think of Mount Everest as anything but *Mount Everest*, things are always more complicated than they at first appear. (I use the italics on purpose, for Waugh was right: its name has become a household word that communicates awe, challenge, danger, and even triumph – but are these qualities inherently in the mountain or the result of social groups projecting the qualities onto it?) In fact, despite

the commonsense assumption that the names we give to things reflect, capture or correspond to some key feature of the things being named (called the **correspondence theory of meaning**), the names we give to things may, instead, tell us more about the namer than they do about the thing being named. For example, despite the name for this mountain now being a household word, the fact that we say it the way we do sets us rather far apart from the people who might have read Waugh's letter back in 1856. For if you had the opportunity to meet the good Colonel for whom the mountain was named, and pronounced his name as we do now, 'Ever-est', you would have been quickly corrected to pronounce it as 'Eve-rest'. Although this seems a rather minor example that can be easily overlooked – as in when some people in the US say 'pop' and others say 'soda' for what both agree to be a carbonated beverage or soft drink – it does bring to light the fact that names are products of social worlds that change over time; despite what we usually think, names are not necessarily neutral and objective labels that are placed on things. 'Mount Ever-est' has become such a widely accepted pronunciation that you'd likely have trouble using 'Mont Eve-rest' to conjure up a sense of awe in a conversation with someone, for more than likely they wouldn't be able to get past what they'd hear as your mispronunciation of the name. Whether or not the way in which Sir George Everest pronounced his own name has any bearing on how we say it today – in other words, is it correct to say that we are 'mispronouncing' it, as if his own pronunciation was a standard against which all others are measured? – is a topic to which we shall have to return when studying the way people understand and talk about their own beliefs and behaviors (what we call the insider/outsider problem – a topic raised in the earlier quotation from Waugh's letter concerning his habit of trying, when possible, to use the 'native appellation' for geographical features).

But it is not just the fact that the pronunciation has changed over the past 150 years – as if the meaning was uniform despite differences in the way it was pronounced. Whether or not Waugh knew it at the time, the south side of the mountain (which is the side that is seen from the modern country of Nepal) had long been known as 'Sagarmatha', meaning 'goddess of the sky'; and in Tibet, on the north side of the mountain, it had long been called 'Chomolungma', meaning 'mother goddess of the universe'. Although of little use to the British surveyors, these two local names were obviously meaningful and useful to those who had long used them, for these classifications functioned in relation to systems of belief and behavior that helped to make the Nepalese and Tibetan social worlds possible. And let's not forget that to Colonel Everest himself the mountain was not known as Mount Everest, at least not while he worked on

the survey, but simply 'Himalaya Peak 15' – a seemingly neutral designation but one equally immersed in a complex belief and behavioral system, one that had something to do with the importance of measuring mountains in distant lands in the first place, and naming them by using a modern numbering system derived from both ancient Indian and Arabic cultures. Including these names, along with the various pronunciations of Everest's own name and Waugh's original use of the French 'Mont', we have at least six designations for what some could simply understand as a common, and therefore relatively uninteresting, geological formation that began forming about sixty million years ago when one tectonic plate started moving north at about fifteen centimeters per year, grinding against another plate and thrusting the sediment upward.

Voilà, a mountain is born.

This little episode in the history of naming is just the tip of a rather large topic that, when we are going about our daily business, we simply (perhaps necessarily) overlook. But if we pause and refocus our attention – something scholars generally do – we might start asking some questions that we might otherwise not have asked: Just why does a mountain in Nepal bear the name of a British surveyor? Despite Waugh's seemingly well-intended assurance that they always worked 'to assign to every geographical object its true local or native appellation', what were the British even doing in India in the first place and why were they mapping it from top to bottom? Are maps, like the names we give to things, simply neutral representations that correspond to stable land masses or, like height being measured in relation to sea level, which is itself hardly a stable basis, are they expressions of ever-changing relationships, not only between the namer and the thing being named but between competing namers and their competing names and competing interests? If we opt for the former choice, then we take no notice of the fact that a mountain high in the Himalayas is named for a man born in 1790 in Greenwich, England (pronounced Gren-itch), and we simply continue presuming that Mount Everest couldn't be anything but Mount Everest – after all, if this is the way we approach naming then the name bears some direct relationship to some inner aspect, quality or **essence** in the thing being named. A slight variation to this approach is to hold that objects possess some inner characteristic that is only arbitrarily and loosely linked to the labels that we place on them. After all, whether you are an English speaker and call it a book, *livre* in French or *Buch* in German, you still read it. And, whether you know it as pop or soda (or simply calling all carbonated beverages Coke, as they do in the US south), you still drink it when you're thirsty.

But if we do not think that one can so easily separate name from identity – therefore making it rather difficult for young Romeo simply to,

as Juliet requests, 'doff thy name, which is no part of thee' – then we might opt for the latter choice and understand the ways that groups define, classify, name and plot things as the tips of very large social and political icebergs bumping up against each other, grinding away at each other. In this case, the rose's sweet smell and its name are not so easily separated. For example, look no further than the very system we now routinely use to tell time and the system we commonly use to plot longitudes (latitudes are determined by the equator) – these are systems of chronological and spatial classification that both make reference to the city in which George Everest happened to be born. Of course, I am referring to Greenwich Mean Time and the Greenwich Prime Meridian of the World, which means that time is measured either as being ahead or behind the time in the city of Greenwich. In the Central Time Zone of the US, where the University of Alabama is located, we are at GMT – 6 ('minus 6' means 6 hours west, and thus 'behind', Greenwich). Moreover, because Greenwich has been given a longitude of 0 degrees, every point on the globe can be measured in relation to being either west or east of this point – much like the use of sea level for measuring height. So, the link between this city in southwest England and the systems we routinely use to plot our place and time on the globe can be seen as (1) an unquestioned natural fact; (2) a neutral, and possibly even arbitrary, relationship, since we had to use somewhere as the starting point; or (3) evidence of the history of British colonial rule, its unmatched naval supremacy over the past several hundred years, and therefore that nation's political and economic dominance of much of the world for quite some time.

So, what's in a name? Apparently, an awful lot.

As we look deeper into the issue of definition, it gets increasingly difficult to see classification as merely a natural, neutral or innocent activity. Instead, classification seems fraught with interests, agendas and implications. It was just this point that was so nicely illustrated in Christopher Monger's film, 'The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain' (1995). Starring Hugh Grant and Tara Fitzpatrick, this romantic comedy was about two English government cartographers (map makers) who arrive in a small village in Wales in 1917, and find that the mountain that is so loved by the locals – which they refer to as 'the first mountain in Wales' – fails to meet the 1,000 foot minimum height to be designated on the cartographers' map as a mountain. Wounded local pride, mixed together with a long history of antagonism between Wales and the rest of England, prompts the townsfolk to get out their shovels and wheelbarrows and add a few extra feet to the 'hill', ensuring that upon being re-measured it is designated by the official map-makers as a 'mountain'.

If this is the case – if classifications are not innocent or natural but, instead, intimately linked to groups of people with (sometimes conflicting) interests – then one might be forced to ask whether the thing we call either 'pop' or 'soda' is always 'something to drink' – after all, what if you're not thirsty? Perhaps, then, it might be an irrelevant item in your environment that does not even attract your attention, much less prompt you to attach a name, and thus an identity and value, to it.

The late **Mary Douglas**, the well-known British **anthropologist**, once observed in her classic 1966 study of ritual purity systems, *Purity and Danger*, that the difference between 'dirt' and 'soil' was that the stuff we know as dirt was 'matter out of place'. Her point? The same generic material takes on different meanings, values and identities in relation to different classification systems, each of which puts into practice different sets of interests – which changes from time to time, group to group, and occasion to occasion. The same generic stuff of the world, once mapped into one set of preferences, allows us to experience it as 'soil' (say, when it is in a farmer's field or providing nourishment for a potted plant in your home), whereas mapped into another set prompts us to see it as 'dirt' (say, when it gets on your clothes or falls from the pot onto the carpet). So, as Douglas concludes, the concept of dirt is 'a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements'. Rephrased, we could say that the label 'dirt' does not necessarily correspond to something dirty in that which we know as 'dirt'; instead, she seems to be saying: Show me something classified as dirt and I'll show you a classification system that prompts us to distinguish safe from dangerous, allowable from unallowable, clean from dirty – not because there's something inherently dangerous in the things we know as a danger but, instead, because things classified as dangerous threaten interests that are of relevance to a group.

Classification is therefore a social act.

Question: could we see such classifications as 'religion', 'myth' or 'ritual' as working in the same way, providing evidence of a larger classification system and set of relationships and preferences? In posing this question I'm getting ahead of myself. For the time being, let's just say that just as 'dirt' and 'soil' are classifications that, depending on the circumstances, interests and the choices of the classifier, we place onto the generic stuff of the world in order to transform it from the undifferentiated background noise of daily life into something significant, something worth paying attention to, so too the difference between 'mountain' and 'hill' may tell us little about some geological formation but, instead, may tell us a great deal about the preferences and interests that inform the competing systems of definition used by various groups of people as they

make sense of their worlds so as to go about the business of living in them. After all, the movie about adding some height to that mountain in Wales wasn't really about the mountain, but, instead, was all about the identity of a group of people aiming to be something more significant than they might have first appeared.

Because we seem not to have the luxury of getting away with no classifications whatsoever and experiencing reality 'in the raw' – after all, in order to talk about and relate to something we need to place it on our horizon by giving it a slot in our vocabularies and thus placing it in our minds, in our stories, and in our histories – classification, like cartography and surveying, is hardly an innocent business; instead, it is tied up with issues of power and identity. When we leave the realm of map-making and turn our attention to the study of religion – that thing which many people believe to be concerned with the deepest, most enduring issues of significance and meaning yet to be considered by human beings – the problem of classification and definition might seem, at first, to get even more complicated. But the hope is that we start to see that the thorny issues involved in definition apply to all things that we study – from cultures and literatures to mountains and hills. If so, then considering in detail what is involved in coming up with a definition of religion that is useful to the scholar interested in studying human cultures will have implications of other areas of study as well.

And so, with this hope in mind, we leave behind the lofty heights of not only Sagarmatha, but also Chomolungma, Himalayan Peak 15, Mount Eve-rest, as well as Mount Ever-est to consider some of the issues involved in classification, for only once we classify, or define and thereby name, something as a specific sort of something, such as knowing a part of the world as 'religion', will we be able to get on with the work of studying it.

2 The History of 'Religion'

Making the leap from mountains to cultures, this chapter invites readers to consider not just religion as an aspect of wider cultural practices, but the very fact that we think such things as religions exist – that some of us even use the word 'religion' – itself to be a cultural artifact. We therefore begin by acquainting ourselves with the history of the very concept 'religion', keeping in mind that knowing the history, development, and limitations of our concepts may come in handy when we try to use them to name, organize, and move around within our worlds.