CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM THE LEXICAL TO THE POLYTHETIC:
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

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Throughout my graduate education in Religious Studies, my in-structors continually impressed upon me the impossibility of defining "religion." Indeed, its indefinability was almost an article of method-ological dogma. When seminar conversations inevitably came around to the question of definition, students were often politely re-ferred to Max Weber's *Sociology of Religion* and his famously cautious approach to the definitional problem. "To define 'religion,' to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start," Weber argued: "Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study."[1] Thus it came as somewhat of shock when I later encountered those in the field who just as vociferously argued the opposite, contending that Weber's definitional strategy made little sense either method-ologically or pedagogically. As one scholar of religion put it, "if in principle we cannot determine what religion is, then we cannot de-termine what it is not, and if this were the case there would be no point in studying it."[2] And further, if "religion" corresponds to no definable object of study, how then can we justify an autonomous field devoted to "religious" studies?

Such is the on-going definitional debate in the academic study of religion. Regardless of where one stands in this debate, however, it is obvious that defining religion has been, and still is, one of the more popular pursuits in the field—a fact attested to by an abundant liter-ature on the subject. During the last hundred years or so, dozens, if not hundreds of proposals have been made, each claiming to solve the definitional problem in a new and unique way. Needless to say, no one definition of religion has garnered a consensus, and the defi-

[1] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 1.
[2] D.H. Freeman, *A Philosophical Study of Religion* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1964), p. 1. The same point is made in Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *Journal of Religion* 52.2 (1972), pp. 107-33; Charles Vernoff, "Naming the Game: A Question of the Field," *Council on the Study of Re-ligion: Bulletin* 14 (1983), pp. 109-13.

nitional enterprise, as well as the debate over the very need for definitions, continues in full vigor.

I, myself, am in two minds about the definitional debate: I understand the methodological attractiveness of working with an explicit definition of religion, but I also understand the difficulties in formulating one that is even marginally adequate. Nevertheless, I have found that the study of the definitional enterprise in general is immensely interesting, and I feel that regardless of where one stands in the definitional debate, the historical development of definitions of religion demands more systematic study than it has received hitherto. Even a cursory review of the literature, for example, reveals that, formally at least, the definition of religion has developed considerably over the last hundred years. Such formal development did not occur spontaneously, but was driven by those issues and ideologies being argued over in the field at large. An awareness of the formal development of definitions of religion thus provides an important perspective on the historical development of the field as a whole—a perspective which, pedagogically at least, could prove to be quite valuable.

In this chapter, therefore, what I wish to do is to provide a brief historical overview of the definitional enterprise in the academic study of religion. Obviously an exhaustive history would require book-length treatment, and what follows is perhaps elliptical in the extreme. However, it is, I feel, a necessary prolegomena to such a future study. Perhaps one of the reasons why the history of the definitional enterprise remains relatively neglected within the academic study of religion is because the field has failed to develop any kind of uniform formal categories for dealing with definitions of religion. In the following pages, therefore, I present a brief historical overview organized with an eye towards highlighting and labeling formal developments in the definition of religion.[3] I hope this overview will serve not only as an introduction to the range of definitional possibilities for religion, but that it will also facilitate further attention to the history of the definitional enterprise in general.

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[3] For formal philosophical approaches to definition, see Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954); Alex C. Michalos, *Principles of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 379-91; Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1971), pp. 89-120; Joannes Augustinus Maria Snook, "Classification and Definition Theory" in his *Initiation: A Methodological Approach to the Application of Classification and Definition Theory in the Study of Rituals* (Pijnacker: Dutch Efficiency Bureau, 1987), pp. 25-56; "Definition" in Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 185-86.

Lexical and Precising Definitions of Religion

Until the early modern period, the evolution of the definition of the word "religion" was largely an unconscious process, the result of a spontaneous social consensus. Philosophers call definitions that develop in this way *lexical* definitions.[4] Lexical definitions tend to be vague and elastic, partaking of the semantic slipperiness of everyday speech. In terms of the word "religion," for example, at any one time and within any given population, it has had a range of meanings, with old meanings often overlapping new meanings.[5] Moreover, lexical definitions of religion, as far as these can be inferred, have tended to be constructed through denotation; that is, the class "religion" was implicitly defined by simply pointing out members of the class (e.g. religion is Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.).[6] Even today, most scholars continue to work from just such lexical definitions of religion.

Beginning with the Enlightenment, however, some scholars have taken the effort to preface their studies with a consciously constructed and reasoned definition of religion. Such definitions attempt to make lexical definitions more precise—hence the name *precising* definitions.[7] Unlike lexical definitions, precising definitions represent a conscious construction of a definition in order to create a community of discourse. Typically, construction of precising definitions is accomplished through connotation, not denotation. In the case of religion, this means that the class "religion" is constructed by indicating the characteristic or characteristics that each member must have to be included in the class (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. are religions because they share characteristics x, y, z, etc.). Precising definitions, therefore, are necessarily theoretical, based as they are on ci-

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[4] For discussions of lexical definitions, see Robinson, *Definition*, pp. 35-58; Michalos, *Principles of Logic*, pp. 382-83; Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, pp. 99-100.

[5] For general overviews of the developing definition of religion from Antiquity to the modern period, see W. Warde Fowler, "The Latin History of the Word 'Religio,'" *Transactions of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions* II (1908), pp. 169-75; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Leopold Sabourin, "What is Religion?" *Religious Studies Bulletin* 1:3 (1981), pp. 58-66; Benson Saler, "*Religio* and the Definition of Religion," *Cultural Anthropology* 2:3 (1987), pp. 395-99; Ernst Feil, "From the Classical *Religio* to the Modern *Religion*: Elements of a Transformation Between 1550 and 1650," in Michel Despland and Gerard Vallée (eds.), *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), pp. 31-44.

[6] For a discussion of denotative vs. connotative definitions, see Michalos, *Principles of Logic*, pp. 388-89 and Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, pp. 107-14.

[7] For a discussion of precising definitions, see Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, pp. 100-10.

ther a descriptive (analytic) or explanatory (synthetic) theory.[8] Depending on the theoretical basis of the definition then, we can speak of *analytic* and *synthetic* precising definitions.

Perhaps one of the earliest precising definitions of religion can be credited to Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648).[9] Distressed by Europe's continuing religious strife and convinced of God's universal benevolence for humankind, Herbert argued that all religions are true at some level. To prove this, Herbert maintained that all religions could be boiled down to five universal characteristics: (1) the belief that there is a Supreme Power external to the world; (2) that this Power is to be worshipped; (3) that worship consists not in outward ceremony, but in piety and holiness; (4) that sin can be expiated; and (5) that there are rewards and punishments after this life.[10] Of course, these five characteristics represent Herbert's attempt to create a new universal religious system and their selection was driven by *a priori* assumptions about what constitutes religion. Nevertheless, Herbert claimed that it was by close "dissection of, and inspection into religions" that the five "Common Notions" of religion were discovered.[11] Along with forming the core of Deism, therefore, the five characteristics can also be seen as an early attempt at an analytic precising definition, that is, a definition based on an analytic or descriptive theory of religion.

Lord Herbert of Cherbury had the confidence to frame an analytic precising definition of religion due to the Enlightenment's ideology of universalism. It was not until the development of evolutionary theory in the 19th century that the next major step in the formal development of precising definitions of religion occurred. From Herbert's time on, increasing ethnographic evidence from the non-western world made it clear that there were systems of belief and practice among the "primitive" peoples of the world that did not fit into a Deistic scheme or its equivalents. Logically, there were two ways of dealing with this: either violate the spirit of Enlightenment universalism and admit that there were cultures that lack religion.

[8] For a discussion of analytic vs. synthetic definitions, see Michalos, *Principles of Logic*, pp. 384-87. See Peter B. Clarke and Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) for a clear discussion of the difference between descriptive and explanatory theories.

[9] See Peter Byrne, "Religion and Religions" in Stewart R. Sutherland (ed.), *The World's Religions* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 3-28, pp. 15-16.

[10] Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Religione Gentilium* (1663), quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1986), p. 16.

[11] Herbert, *De Religione Gentilium* (1663), quoted in J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 29.

Or, "religion" itself could be redefined with fewer characteristics, dropping out those characteristics that "primitive" religions did not seem to share with Christianity, Judaism, Islam or the other "world religions" (e.g. the Judeo-Christian ethical code, belief in post-mortem punishment, etc). Abandoning such characteristics, however, seemed to entail a debasement of the "world religions," placing them on a level with "primitive religion." Evolutionary theory, however, solved this problem by positing the "world religions" as more highly evolved forms of "primitive religions," thus acknowledging a connection between them while simultaneously maintaining their assumed hierarchical relationship.

Although perhaps not the first precising definition based on evolutionary theory, by far the best known is the classic minimal definition of the anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1832-1917). According to Tylor, religion is "a belief in Spiritual Beings."[12] Tylor interpreted the available ethnographic evidence to show that prior to the development of the complex systems of beliefs and practices lexically called religion, human beings had a notion of non-material entities or spirits, a notion that arose naturally through an interpretation of dreams. It was this concept of "spiritual being" that connected all religious systems, since it was out of this rather undifferentiated notion that the concept of deity arose. Indeed, according to Tylor, if one were to posit a unilinear evolution of religion from spirit worship or "animism" through polytheism to monotheism, the one characteristic that remained constant—at least at some basic structural level—was a belief in spiritual beings. For this reason, a belief in spiritual beings could serve as a structural marker for all religious systems regardless of where they were on the evolutionary scale.[13]

[12] E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murphy, 1903): Vol 1, p. 424.

[13] According to Hans G. Kippenburg, Tylor's model for the definition of religion was based on "the comparative anatomy founded by Charles Darwin a few years earlier. Even before Tylor this model had been introduced into the study of societies. In this way, certain elements in the history of mankind, which retained an identical structure despite increasing differentiation, were supposed to be identifiable. Just as the number of vertebrae always remains the same in more and less developed mammals, the belief in souls was held to be a constant in the development of religion. In this sense the soul remains a constant element throughout the history of religions. Its development is identical with the increase of complexity of a given structure." (Hans G. Kippenburg, "Rivalry Among Scholars of Religion: The Crisis of Historicism and the Formation of Paradigms in the History of Religions," *Historical Reflections* 20 [Fall 1994], pp. 377-402, p. 380.) In terms of the creator-of an analytic definition of religion, this approach has something in common with contemporary cladistics in biology.

Importantly, behind Tylor's definition was not simply an analytic theory, but a synthetic or explanatory theory as well. According to Tylor, a belief in spiritual beings was not only a "marker" for all religious systems, but it was also from this simple belief that all the characteristics of religious systems such as myth, doctrine, ritual, ethics, etc. developed. Tylor's definition, therefore, was not only descriptive of the genus *religion*, but it also contained a capsule genetic explanation for the speciation and evolution of all religious systems. In this sense, Tylor's definition functioned both as an analytic *and* a synthetic precising definition of religion.

Not surprisingly, Tylor's minimal definition of religion quickly attracted criticism, primarily in terms of its analytic adequacy. Tylor believed that his precising definition of religion held up well when compared to the lexical definitions of his day. The emphasis on spiritual beings, Tylor believed, could accommodate deity in all its forms. Nevertheless, scholars such as J. G. Frazer (1854-1951) criticized the definition because it cast too wide a net, bringing under the rubric "religion" those systems of "beliefs and practices that Frazer believed should be considered "magic." Religion, Frazer argued, evolved out of magic, but the two systems of beliefs and practices were nevertheless fundamentally different. This opened an exceedingly long-lived debate concerning the difference between magic and religion, a debate that has lasted to this day.[14] As interesting as this debate is, however, it was the opposite critique that Tylor's definition did not cast its net wide *enough* that ultimately had the most impact on the development of new precising definitions of religion. Such a critique came from the pen of another anthropologist, R. R. Marett (1866-1943).[15]

According to Marett, Tylor's minimal definition of religion was in error since examples existed of societies that had systems of beliefs and practices that were obviously religious (lexically speaking), but which did not involve anthropomorphic spiritual beings. In such societies, belief and practice centered around an undifferentiated belief

[14] See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), pp. 87-94. For more recent discussion of the difference between magic and religion, see Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *The British Journal of Sociology* 12:2 (June 1961), pp. 142-64 and H. S. Versnel, "Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion," *Numen* 38:2 (1991), pp. 177-97.

[15] For general discussions of R. R. Marett, see Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, pp. 65-71; Kippenburg, "Rivalry Among Scholars of Religion," pp. 381-82; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 32-37.

in supernatural power. The belief in supernatural power, Marett argued, predated that of the belief in spiritual beings, which was simply the next evolutionary step. In 1900, in a paper entitled "Preanimistic Religion," Marett essayed his own minimal definition of religion as "a belief in supernatural power."[16] Again, as with Tylor's, Marett's definition was both analytic and synthetic in intent. According to Marett all religious systems embodied at some level this simple belief and thus, "belief in supernatural power" was a good marker for all religious systems past and present. And this, in turn, was precisely because all religious systems in all their complexity found their ultimate causal origin in the belief in supernatural power. Although formally Marett's precising definition was little different from Tylor's, it would nevertheless serve as the catalyst for the next step in the formal development of precising definitions of religion.

Real, Substantive, and Functional Definitions of Religion

According to Hans G. Kippenburg, Marett's preanimism was wildly influential in the first decade of the new century and represented the closest the field has ever come to reaching a consensus on a precising definition of religion.[17] The consensus, if it existed at all, did not last long. For Marett, the origin of the belief in supernatural power was due to a powerful emotional experience—an experience logically prior to belief. Marett, however, left the nature of the experience uncertain, and because of this, it was unclear whether Marett would have claimed that the experience itself was somehow inherently religious.[18] It was at this point that Marett's anthropological theory of the origin of religion intersected with the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher stressed the primacy and self-authenticating nature of religious experience.[19] Followers of Schleiermacher, therefore, did not hesitate to claim that the powerful experience indicated by Marett was transcendent in origin and completely *sui generis* in

[16] This article was reprinted in R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (New York, 1919). See also R. R. Marett, "The Tabu-Mana Formula as a Minimum Definition of Religion," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 12 (1909), pp. 186-94.

[17] Kippenburg, "Rivalry Among Scholars of Religion," pp. 382-86.

[18] Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 33.

[19] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (London: Kegan Paul, 1893). For a good discussion of Schleiermacher, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of the Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 13-18.

nature. Accordingly, the theologian Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) argued for an even more radical precising definition of religion than that proposed by Marett. For Otto, religion was not simply a *belief* in supernatural power, but a completely unique experience of that power, an experience that could be approximately characterized as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.[20]

Some scholars of religion, however, were unwilling to make this complete definitional leap from belief to experience. If Schleiermacher represented one European intellectual tradition in which religion sprang from a *sui generis* experience of the transcendent, there was another intellectual tradition that questioned the reality of such experiences altogether. Beginning with the works of David Hume (1711-1776), but perhaps culminating in the psychology of Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud, this other tradition ascribed "religious" experience to human origins, and explained it away as simply another order of human emotion.[21] For these scholars, there was no such thing as a *sui generis* "religious" experience—only experiences religiously interpreted. It was true, as Marett had contended, that a powerful experience causes religion, but only in the sense that such experiences provoke the human imagination to invent an explanation for its origin, hence the (mistaken) belief in supernatural power.

Differences over how far Marett's minimal definition of religion could be pushed served to crystallize tensions between those scholars who sought transcendental explanations of religion and those who sought naturalistic explanations. In a sense, Marett's definition brought to the fore a different kind of definitional debate—a debate that had been latent in the academic study of religion from its beginning. Harking back to Aristotle, philosophers have traditionally recognized the difference between real and nominal definitions.[22] The lexical and precising definitions we have been dealing with up to this point are classified as nominal definitions. Nominal defini-

[20] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950). Such definitions were also associated with Nathan Söderblom and Gerardus van der Leeuw (see Kippenberg, "Rivalry Among Scholars of Religion," pp. 382-84). For a good discussion of Otto, see Capps, *Religious Studies*, pp. 20-25. For a recent call for a return to a definition of religion based on religious experience, see Karal R. Wernhart, "Religious Beliefs per se"—a Human Universality," *Anthropos* 81 (1986): 648-52.

[21] For discussion of Hume and Freud, see Preus, *Explaining Religion*. For a discussion of Wundt, see Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, pp. 37-38.

[22] For a discussion of the difference between real and nominal definitions, see Robinson, *Definition*, pp. 149-92; Michalos, *Principles of Logic*, pp. 379-81; Audi, "Definition," pp. 185-86.

tions are constructed more or less by an empirical process of affixing a name to an object or class of objects. A real definition, on the other hand, is a "specification of the metaphysically necessary and sufficient condition for being the kind of thing a noun...designates."[23] In other words, real definitions are constructed by signaling the metaphysical essence of an object or class of objects. Of course, if one does not believe in a metaphysical reality, then real definitions are *ipso facto* impossible.

For most of the history of the study of religion in the West, real definitions of religion have generally been assumed to be possible. Only in the modern period, when materialist philosophies came to be taken with increased seriousness, could real definitions of religion be dismissed as meaningless. With Marett's precising definition of religion, the debate over the proper nominal definition for religion collided with the debate over the real definition of religion. Whether one was willing to make the definitional leap from belief to experience corresponded to some degree with whether one believed in a metaphysical reality or not. Those who held a positive real definition of religion tended to embrace definitions of religion such as Otto's, while those who held a negative real definition of religion preferred definitions such as those of Marett and Tylor which allowed for naturalistic explanations of religion. In time, the tensions wrought by Marett's preanimism forced the creation of yet a third approach to the study of religion in which one remains neutral in regard to real definitions of religion. For those who embraced this third approach, the goal of the academic study of religion would always remain primarily descriptive, not explanatory. And when it came to the metaphysical reality of religion, one was to practice *epochè*, that is, the suspension of judgement in regard to real definitions of religion.[24]

Despite the articulation of this neutral position, however, the debate over the real definition of religion remained acute during the first decades of the century. The rancor generated by this debate was especially problematic since the academic study of religion was then struggling to establish itself as an autonomous field of study. Fortuitously, there soon began during this period a new wave of theorizing which would culminate in the formulation of new precising definitions of religion—precising definitions that would neatly avoid the question of real definitions altogether. Functionalism was the

[23] Audi, "Definition," p. 186.

[24] For a discussion of the concept of *epochè*, see G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, translated by J. E. Turner (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 646 (note 1) and p. 683.

basis of this new theorizing, and its promoters promised that it would bring new insights into the origin and persistence of religion. The most important of the functional theories of religion were those derived from the social functionalism of Emile Durkheim and the psychological functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski. Ironically, both scholars were firmly committed to negative real definitions of religion.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim worked through a series of precising definitions of religion. At the beginning of that work, Durkheim used Marett's preanimism theory and definition as a starting point.[25] Durkheim, however, was most emphatically not one of those scholars willing to make the definitional leap from belief to experience. Religious beliefs were indeed the consequence of a powerful experience, although there was nothing supernatural about this experience. It was simply the natural result of certain extreme social situations ("collective effervescence").[26] Importantly, such experience led not only to a belief in supernatural power, but to a complete division of the world into those things that are associated with this power ("the sacred") and those things that are not ("the profane"). Indeed, Durkheim used this dichotomy as the basis for his own minimal precising definition: religion is a "division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane."[27] Durkheim's minimal definition is both analytic and synthetic in intent: not only can all religions be identified as such by their division of the world between sacred and profane, but it is out of the idea of the "sacred" that all the beliefs and practices characteristic of religion (lexically defined) subsequently develop.

In a sense, Durkheim's minimal precising definition of religion could be seen as nothing more than a more sophisticated restatement of Marett's preanimism. However, Durkheim went beyond Marett in that he was interested not simply in what religion was, but in what religion did. Religion, Durkheim surmised, would not have survived and become such an integral part of human society if it did not contribute to the integrity and survival of society. Religion, in other words, must have some social function. Accordingly, Durkheim amended his precising definition of religion to read: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred

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25 Kippenburg, "Rivalry Among Scholars of Religion," pp. 384-85.
26 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 230-32.
27 Ibid., p. 52.

things; that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."[28] Formally, this represented a new kind of precising definition, a definition that emphasized not only the substantive characteristics of religion (a "system of beliefs and practices"), but also its characteristic social function (the "beliefs and practices...unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them").

Since its introduction, Durkheim's functional theory of religion and the definition based on it have proven exceedingly popular.[29] Even after both the data and the evolutionary presuppositions behind Durkheim's (and Marett's) recovery of the historical origins of religion came under fire, Durkheim's insight into the functionality of religion still remained compelling. Indeed, in time, the functional characteristics of religion came to be seen as fundamental, and gradually one sees a shift away from definitions of religion that stress the combination of substantive and functional characteristics to those that emphasize purely functional characteristics alone.[30] In other words, any system of beliefs and practices that promotes social unity could be viewed as a religious system, regardless of the specific content of the beliefs and practices.[31] It did not matter whether such traditions contained elements of the supernatural or depended on some kind of transcendent referent. Indeed, Durkheim himself argued that the value of such functional definitions of religion was that they allowed space for traditions such as Buddhism, which, while clearly a religion lexically speaking, nevertheless does not pivot on "the idea of gods and spirits."[32]

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28 Ibid., p. 62.
29 For an excellent discussion of the development and subsequent influence of Durkheim's definition of religion, see Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 106-40.
30 For discussion of the shift from substantive to functional definitions of religion, see Peter L. Berger, "Sociological Definitions of Religion" in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc, 1969), pp. 175-77 and Robert A. Segal, "Anthropological Definitions of Religion," *Zygon* 20:1 (1985), pp. 78-79. For a general discussion of substantive vs. functional definitions of religion, see Karel Dobbelaere and Jan Lauwers, "Definitions of Religion—A Sociological Critique," *Social Compass* 20 (1973/4), pp. 535-51.
31 For a recent version of a purely socio-functional definition of religion, see Loyal D. Rue, "Redefining Myth and Religion: Introduction to a Conversation," *Zygon* 29.3 (1994), pp. 315-19.
32 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 37-57. For a critique of Durkheim's interpretation of Buddhism, see Marco Orru and Amy Wang, "Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31:1 (1992): 47-61.

Perhaps just as importantly, the de-emphasis of belief in the transcendent as a *sine qua non* characteristic of religious systems seemed to render controversies over the reality of the transcendent, not to mention real definitions, far less relevant to the academic study of religion. Moreover, socio-functional definitions of religion helped to deflect attention away from real definitions in another way. Fueled by evolutionary theory, early anthropologists and sociologists, including Durkheim, were intensely interested in discovering the historical origins of religion. In time, however, both evolutionary theory and the quest for the historical origins of religion fell into disrepute. Functionalism and functional definitions served to shift attention away from the discredited quest for the historical origins of religion, placing emphasis instead on explanations of the persistence of religion. As a consequence, attention was also diverted away from potentially divisive questions about the *ultimate* origins of religion, thus forestalling debates about the real definition of religion.

A similar shift to purely functional definitions can also be noted with those definitions based on the psychological function of religion. One of the clearest statements of psychological functionalism comes in the work of Bronislaw Malinowski.[33] For Malinowski, religion was "intrinsically although indirectly connected with man's fundamental, that is, biological, needs."[34] Malinowski said "indirectly" because religion, with its systems of belief concerning supernatural powers and deities, functioned to relieve the psychological anxiety that comes with "the curse of forethought and imagination, which fall on man once he rises above brute animal nature."[35] Specifically, religion helped human beings deal with a "range of anxieties, forebodings and problems concerning human destinies and man's place in the universe."[36] Ultimately, religion is that which "is largely concerned with the sacralization of the crises of human life," especially the "supreme crisis," death.[37] In short, for Malinowski, those systems

[33] For a good discussion of Bronislaw Malinowski's work and influence, see Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, pp. 148-49. For recent examples of Malinowski's influence on the definition of religion, see E. R. Goodenough, "A Historian of Religion Tries to Define Religion," *Zygon* 2:1 (1967), pp. 7-22 and Ward H. Goodenough, "Toward an Anthropologically Useful Definition of Religion," in Allan W. Eister (ed.), *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), pp. 165-84.

[34] Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Role of Magic and Religion" in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 37-45, p. 45.

[35] Ibid., pp. 37-45.

[36] Ibid., p. 45.

[37] Ibid., p. 46.

of beliefs and practices which served to ameliorate the greatest and most intractable problems of human existence could rightly be called religion.

As with Durkheim's definition of religion, Malinowski's definition was formally a precising definition with both substantive characteristics (systems of beliefs and practices) and functional characteristics (the psychological function of anxiety reduction). As happened with socio-functional definitions, however, there seems to have been a gradual shift away from a substantive/functional precising definition to a purely functional definition. Such purely psycho-functional definitions maintained that any system of belief and practice that addressed humanity's fundamental existential concerns was *ipso facto* religion, regardless of the content of those systems. Perhaps the most famous formulation of a purely psycho-functional definition was that of Paul Tillich, who maintained that "[r]eligion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern."[38] Although Tillich constructed his definition in response to theological currents somewhat removed from those in the academic study of religion, nevertheless, purely psycho-functional precising definitions of the "ultimate concern" variety became at least as popular as socio-functional definitions in the academic study of religion from the late 1950s on.[39] Again, as with purely socio-functional definitions of religion, purely psycho-functional definitions of religion de-emphasized the transcendent as the *sine qua non* of religion and de-emphasized the quest for the historical origins of religion, thus helping to deflect attention away from divisive questions about the real definition of religion.

[38] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), quoted in Capps, *Religious Studies*, p. 34.

[39] For examples of "ultimate concern" definitions, see J. M. Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 9; Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1957), p. 6; Hideo Kishimoto, "An Operational Definition of Religion," *Numen* 8 (1961), pp. 236-40; J. Paul Williams, "The Nature of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2:1 (1962), pp. 3-17; Robert D. Baird, "Interpretative Categories and the History of Religions" in James S. Helfer (ed.), *On Method in the History of Religions* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 17-30; E.H. Pyle, "In Defence of 'Religion'," *Religious Studies* 3 (1968), pp. 347-53; Frederick Ferré, "The Definition of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (1970), pp. 11-16; Frederick J. Streng, "Studying Religion: Possibilities and Limitations of Different Definitions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40:2 (1974), pp. 219-37; Morton B. King, "Is Scientific Study of Religion Possible," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30:1 (1991): 108-13.

Monothetic and Polythetic Definitions of Religion

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, purely functional definitions of either the socio-functional or psycho-functional type have continued to be extraordinarily popular. They have dominated, in fact, much of the discourse of the academic study of religion.[40] Indeed, certainly the best-known definition of religion to come out of the 1960s—that of Clifford Geertz—was essentially an ambitious attempt to combine social function and psychological function into a single precising definition of religion. According to Geertz, religion was "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[41] Again, as with other purely functional definitions, religion was simply "a system of symbols," the content of which was relatively unimportant. What was important was that these symbols functioned to establish a "general order of existence," or, in Geertz's terms, a "world view." World views in turn served to establish an "ethos," "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods," which ultimately functioned to promote both psychological and social integration.

Despite their popularity, purely functional precising definitions were not immune to criticism. Some called into question the analytic adequacy of purely functional definitions because they failed to correspond to most lexical definitions of religion. For example, some religions (lexically so-defined) work against social cohesion or seem to undermine psychological well-being.[42] Are millenarian movements, then, not to be classified as religious because they function to

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[40] A point made by Robert W. Friedrichs, "The Functionalist Paradigm Dominating Social Scientific Study of Religion and a Structural Alternative," Council on the Study of Religion: Bulletin 13 (Fall 1982), pp. 1-5.

[41] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125, p. 90.

[42] For such critiques see Allan W. Eister, "Religious Institutions in Complex Societies: Difficulties in the Theoretic Specifications of Functions" American Sociological Review 22 (1957), pp. 387-91; Richard Machalek, "Definitional Strategies in the Study of Religion," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 16: 4 (1977), pp. 395-401, p. 399; Murray L. Wax, "The Paradoxes are Numerous," Zygon 20:1 (1985): 79-89. It is interesting to note that the socio-functional definitions that became most popular were those that emphasized religion's positive role in social cohesion, and not those, à la Marx, that emphasized religion's negative function as "ideology"; see, Stephen J. Casey, "Definitions of Religion: A Matter of Taste?" Horizons 11:1 (1984), pp. 86-99. For a discussion of Marxist definitions of religion, see Gregory Baum, "Definitions of Religion in Sociology" in Mircea Eliade and

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disrupt the social order? Are authoritarian "cults" not to be classified as religious if they function to disrupt one's psychic integrity? To fix on positive functions alone as the defining factor for religion seemed to entail normative judgments that were hardly appropriate for an objective field of study. On the other hand, some scholars took the opposite tack, contending that purely functional definitions were actually too undiscriminating when judged against lexical definitions.[43] While purely functional definitions made space for non-theistic Buddhism, Confucianism, etc., they also allowed for all sorts of systems of beliefs and practices not normally (i.e. lexically) deemed religious to be labeled as such. Such problematic "religions" ranged from Marxism to nationalism to big league sports.[44]

In addition to the analytic critiques, purely functional definitions of religion were also open to criticism of their synthetic adequacy. Since the 1960s, functionalism in general has come under attack because of its limited explanatory power.[45] Functions, it is argued, are side-effects and can never account for the origins of any substantive phenomena. Functions may select for certain substantive phenomena, according to a kind of "natural selection," and therefore functionalism might account for the persistence and development of certain cultural, social, or psychological structures, but this again does not account for the origins of any of these structures. In terms of religion, the functional utility of theological or cosmological ideas, rituals, ethical schemes, etc. could never account for how these beliefs and practices came about in the first place. Functional theories may

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David Tracy (eds), What is Religion? An Inquiry for Christian Theology (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 25-32, pp. 30-32.

[43] Machalek, "Definitional Strategies in the Study of Religion," p. 398, and Baum, "Definitions of Religion in Sociology," pp. 28-29.

[44] Indeed, such functional definitions had the decided Cold War utility of classifying Marxism as a religion; see, for example, Werner Cohn, "Is Religion Universal? Problems of Definition," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 2:1 (1962), pp. 25-35, or Philip E. Devine, "On the Definition of 'Religion,'" Faith and Philosophy 3:3 (1986), pp. 270-84. For a critique of the notion of sports as religion, see Joan M. Chandler, "Sport is Not a Religion" in Shirl J. Hoffman (ed), Sport and Religion (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), pp. 55-62.

[45] For example, see Robin Horton, "A Definition of Religion, and its Uses," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 90 (1960), pp. 201-26, P. Worsley, "Religion as a Category" in Roland Robertson (ed.), Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 61-76, John Y. Fenton, "Reductions in the Study of Religions," Soundings 53:1 (1970), pp. 221-35; see the articles "Religion, Explanation of" and "The Study of Religion" in Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 894-97 and pp. 909-17, respectively.

account for the persistence of these substantive characteristics of religion, but they can never explain their origins.

In response to these and other critiques, a few investigators in the 1960s chose to return to substantive precising definitions à la Tylor or Marett. Anthropologists such as Horton, Goody, Spiro, and Swanson all embraced definitions that specified a belief in "spiritual beings" or, in Spiro's less tendentious phrase, "superhuman beings" as the *sine qua non* of religion.[46] This in turn spawned a relatively small but vigorous research tradition that took as its starting point such precising definitions of religion.[47] Not surprisingly, the same critiques that were leveled at Tylor's and Marett's definitions have been revived as well.[48] although the counter-arguments have changed somewhat. For instance, when it was pointed out that the minimal definition of religion as "belief in superhuman beings" excluded certain non-theistic traditions, some, most notably Spiro, frankly admitted that perhaps "religion" is not a category universal to all human cultures. The "criterion of cross-cultural applicability," according to Spiro, "does not entail...universality."[49] As a consequence, Spiro argued that some lexically-defined religions in which superhuman beings do not figure, such as Confucianism, should simply not be classified as religion.[50]

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[46] Horton, "A Definition of Religion, and its Uses"; Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *The British Journal of Sociology* 12:2 (June 1961), pp. 142-64; Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation" in M. Banton (ed.) *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Press, 1966), pp. 85-126; G. E. Swanson, "Experience of the Supernatural" in Roland Robertson (ed.), *Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 237-52.

[47] See, for example, W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "Is There a Science of Religion?" *Religion in Southern Africa* 3:1 (Ja 1982), pp. 3-17; Hans H. Penner, *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994); E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For a critique of the last two studies, see Stewart Elliott Guthrie, "Religion: What Is It?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35:4 (1996), pp. 412-19. For a critique of Guthrie's own theory and definition, as presented in *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), see Edward A. Yonan, "Religion as Anthropomorphism: A New Theory that Invites Definitional and Epistemic Scrutiny," *Religion* 25 (1995), pp. 31-34.

[48] For example, Murray L. Wax, "Review of *Religion: An Anthropological View*," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2:1 (1962), pp. 112-13 and Werner Cohn, "Is Religion Universal? Problems of Definition," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2:1 (1962), pp. 25-35.

[49] Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p. 91.

[50] Ibid., p. 94. Others, however, in order to preserve the universality of religion, have proposed substantive precising definitions based on other substantive characteristics perceived by their authors to be universal. Peter L. Berger, for example, has

In terms of synthetic critiques, the revived substantive precising definitions were just as vulnerable as when they were first proposed. As with Tylor's and Marett's formulations, these revived substantive precising definitions were at some level claims to be capsule explanations of both the origin of "religion" as well as the diversity of "religions." However, as observed above, the evolutionary presuppositions that allowed Tylor and Marett to claim that they had recovered the historical origins of religion had been discredited. Therefore, while these revived precising definitions still claimed to encapsulate the origins of religion, the origins referred to were ontogenic, not phylogenic. In other words, research shifted from the historical origins of religion to the recurrent origins of religion, especially as they were thought to be found in psychological development and in the very structure of human consciousness. Cognitive anthropologists, for example, argued that the human mind was predisposed to acquire certain kinds of "mental representations," including the idea of "superhuman beings."[51] Of course, whether this insight into the ontogenic origins of religion can be extended to account for the development of all religious systems remains to be seen. Research along these lines still remains largely undone.

It should also be said that the return to substantive precising definitions, with all their implicit claims about origins, revived the debate over real definitions of religion. The research tradition discussed above, for example, was strongly committed to a negative real definition of religion or what Peter Berger called "methodological atheism."[52] It was perhaps for this reason that not all of those who rejected purely functional definitions of religion were willing to return to substantive precising definitions. Some, especially religious studies scholars committed to "methodological agnosticism,"[53] advo-

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suggested belief in a sacred cosmos is a universal substantive characteristic of religion ("Sociological Definitions of Religion," in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1969], pp. 175-77).

[51] See, for example, E. Thomas Lawson, "Defining Religion...Going the Theoretical Way," chapter four in this volume.

[52] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp. 100, 180. Indeed, it is perhaps from the re-introduction of substantive precising definitions in the 1960s that we can trace the origins of the contemporary "reductionism debate." For more on the reductionism debate, see Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan, *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, & the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

[53] Methodological agnosticism is the position that one must always hold open at least the *possibility* that the transcendent exists. For discussions of methodological agnosticism, see Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: The Seabury

cated instead a return to purely analytic precising definitions—but analytic precising definitions constructed according to a new model. This new model was based on the concept of *polythetic* or "family resemblance" classes.[54]

Up to this point, the precising definitions that we have been discussing have been based on a set of *sine qua non* characteristics (e.g. Herbert's Deism) or a single *sine qua non* characteristic (e.g. Tylor's "spiritual beings" or Tillich's "ultimate concern"). Under such definitions, systems of beliefs and practices must have all the characteristics (or the one characteristic) in order to qualify as a religious system. Definitions that are based on a set of *sine qua non* characteristics or a single *sine qua non* characteristic are called *monothetic* definitions. Polythetic definitions, on the other hand, are more flexible because they are based on relative instead of absolute identification. A polythetic definition of religion is based on a set of characteristics, only some of which a system must have in order to be counted as a religion. Say, for example, we are comparing four distinct systems of beliefs and practices. System 1 contains characteristics a, b, and c; system 2 has characteristics b, c, and d; system 3 has characteristics c, d, and e; and system 4 has characteristics d, e, and f. No one of these systems of beliefs and practices is identical to another, but they all have some characteristics in common with some of the other systems. In other words, while not identical, they nevertheless share, to use Wittgenstein's phrase, a "family resemblance."[55] If we define religion to mean any system that contains some—but not necessarily all—of the characteristics (a, b, c, d, e, f...etc.), this then is a polythetic definition of religion.

Press, 1973); Donald Wiebe, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *Studies in Religion* 7:1 (1978), pp. 5-17; Karel Werner, "The Concept of the 'Transcendent: Questions of Method in the History of Religions," *Religion* 13 (1983), pp. 311-22; Michael Pye, "Religion: Shape and Shadow," *Numen* 41 (1994), pp. 51-75.

[54] For discussions of polythetic classification schemes, see Rodney Needham, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences," *Man* 10:3 (September, 1975), pp. 349-69 and especially Snock, "Classification and Definition Theory," pp. 25-56. The language of monothetic vs. polythetic is borrowed from biological taxonomy (see Snock, p. 30).

[55] The first explicit articulation of this definitional model is generally credited to Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 32e. One of the earliest proposals of a family resemblance definition of religion is found in Ninian Smart, "Numen, Nirvana, and the Definition of Religion," *Church Quarterly Review* 160 (1959), pp. 216-25. It is interesting to note that Smart proposed his family resemblance definition of religion in the context of a critique of lexical adequacy of Otto's experiential definition of religion. Recently, Smart has renewed his call for family resemblance definitions of religion in, "Theravada Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," *Sophia* 34:1 (1995), pp. 161-66.

CHART 1
POLYTHETIC DEFINITIONS

Open or Fully Polythetic (Family Resemblance) Definitions

Religion 1 = A + B + C characteristics
Religion 2 = B + C + D characteristics
Religion 3 = C + D + E characteristics
Religion 4 = D + E + F characteristics
...etc.

Prototypical Polythetic (Family Resemblance) Definitions

Prototype Religion = A + B+ C + D+ E + F + G characteristics
Religion 1 = C + D + E + F + G characteristics
Religion 2 = B + D + F + G characteristics
Religion 3 = A + B + C + D + E + F characteristics
Religion 4 = C + E + F + G characteristics
...etc.

In practice, there are two ways of constructing polythetic definitions.[56] In the example above, the definition is an *open* or *fully* polythetic definition. It is "open" because the definition no one member of the class "religion" contains all the characteristics (a, b, c, d, e, f...etc.). In some cases, one of the members of the class *does* contain all the characteristics and functions as the "prototype" for all the other members of the class. Polythetic definitions that are constructed in this way are called *prototypical* polythetic definitions. The two types of polythetic definitions are summarized in chart one above.

As with any other definition of religion, polythetic definitions, too, are not without their critics. For one thing, how does one go about selecting the set of characteristics that form the basis for polythetic classification? In prototypical polythetic definitions, this problem is solved since one religion is taken as "an ideally clear case of religion" against which all other systems of beliefs and practices are

[56] See W. P. Alston, "Religion" in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Volume 7 (New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1967): 140-45.

compared.[57] This in itself presents two problems. First, what is the minimum number of characteristics that a system must share with the prototype religion in order to be classified as a religion? And second, will not the choice of a prototype religion bias the definition in such a way that it becomes invincibly ethnocentric?[58]

It has been suggested that a possible response to these critiques is to adopt a completely open polythetic definition of religion.[59] With an open polythetic definition of religion, it does not matter much where one starts, since it is assumed that no one example of religion will contain all the characteristics, and thus no one example of religion would become normative. Nevertheless, the question then becomes where does one stop the definitional chain? Since membership in the class "religion" can be conferred on a system of beliefs and practices based simply on its sharing one or two characteristics with any other member of the class, the class is then infinitely expandable. As with purely functional definitions, open polythetic definitions could be used to place almost any system of beliefs and practices under the rubric "religion." In the end, if prototypical polythetic definitions are too exclusive and tend towards ethnocentric bias, the opposite is true of open polythetic definitions since they tend towards an indiscriminate universalism. Despite these criticisms, however, polythetic definitions of religion have become increasingly popular—so popular in fact that it has recently been observed that "practically every introductory textbook on religion is testimony" to the popularity of polythetic definitions of religion.[60]

[57] The quoted phrase is from Alston, "Religion," p. 142. For a clear endorsement of a prototypical polythetic definition, see Benson Saler, "Cultural Anthropology and the Definitions of Religion" in Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research* (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1994), pp. 831-36. Perhaps the best known prototypical polythetic definition of religion is Ninian Smart's dimensional approach; see, for example, Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983).

[58] For the critique of prototypical polythetic definitions on the grounds of their inherent ethnocentrism, see William Herbrechtsmeier, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32:1 (1993), pp. 1-18; Timothy Fitzgerald, "Hinduism and the 'World Religion' Fallacy," *Religion* 20 (1990), pp. 101-118; Donald Wiebe, "Benson Saler, 'Conceptualizing Religion'," *Numen* 42 (1995), pp. 78-82; Stewart Elliott Guthrie, "Religion: What Is It?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35:4 (1996), pp. 412-19.

[59] For discussion and endorsement of open polythetic definitions, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-18; W. Richard Comstock, "Toward Open Definitions of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52:3 (1986), pp. 499-517; Bertel Wåhlström, "The Indefinability of Religion," *Temenos* 17 (1981), pp. 101-15; Jacques Waardenburg, "In Search of an Open Concept of Religion," in Despland and Vallée (eds.), *Religion in History*, pp. 225-42.

[60] Herbrechtsmeier, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," p. 6.

Conclusion

As we have seen, a variety of definitions of religion have appeared in the literature of the academic study of religion over the last hundred years or so. Despite their diversity, however, these definitions can be reduced to a few formal categories as summarized in chart two below. Again, it is not my belief that such formal analysis and classification will instantly produce a consensus on a definition of religion, nor do I think it will convince those not already so-inclined that a definition of religion is truly necessary. Nevertheless, such formal analysis is useful for at least two other reasons.

CHART 2
FORMAL POSSIBILITIES FOR THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

I Real definitions of religion
   a. Positive vs. negative real definitions of religion.
II. Nominal definitions of religion.
   a. Lexical definitions of religion.
   b. Precising definitions of religion.
   i. Analytic vs. Synthetic precising definitions.
   ii. Substantive vs. Functional precising definitions.
   iii. Monothetic vs. Polythetic precising definitions.

First, formal analysis of definitions of religion gives us a useful starting place for the evaluation of new definitions of the same formal type. Recently, for example, Brian K. Smith offered a new precising definition of religion based on the functional characteristic of "canonicity." According to Smith, the *sine qua non* characteristic that all religions share is "a canonical source—whether it be a text or set of texts, an oral tradition of a myth or set of myths, the pronouncements of the founder, or any other functional equivalent (i.e. any other absolutely authoritative source for legitimation)."[61] Smith's formulation is definitely one of the most original definitions of religion to be proposed in years, and yet, formally, it is simply another example of a purely functional precising definition of religion. As such, it is open to the same kinds of analytic and synthetic critiques to which all formally-equivalent definitions are subject. In order to

[61] Brian K. Smith, "Exorcising the Transcendent: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion," *History of Religions* 27 (1987), pp. 32-55, p. 53.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

most efficiently build on past scholarly effort, therefore, perhaps the first step in evaluating new definitions of religion should be submitting them to formal analysis and critique.

The second reason formal analysis of definitions of religion is important is because it contributes to a fuller "second-order" understanding of the field as a whole. As stated in the introduction, I feel the history of the definitional enterprise has been unduly neglected, partly because the field has failed to develop any kind of uniform formal categories for dealing with definitions of religion. This is unfortunate since, as we have seen, many of the issues that influence the construction and popularity of certain forms of definitions have also driven the development of the academic study of religion at large. In this chapter, I have had space to touch on only a few of these issues, e.g. Enlightenment universalism, evolutionary theory, and, especially, the debates over the real definition of religion. Undoubtedly, a much more thorough investigation is in order. However, if the categories I have proposed in this chapter prove useful for developing a more sophisticated history of the definitional enterprise and facilitate the teaching of that history, then I will consider it successful.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THINKING RELIGION

Charles E. Winquist

...while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholars study.
—Jonathan Z. Smith.[1]

For my purposes, religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world.
—Charles H. Long.[2]

Probity

The field of the study of religion does not have clearly defined boundaries or methodologies that are universally acceptable or applied. Instead, the field has emerged out of a complex of related disciplines primarily from the human sciences that through their diverse applications have made the field responsible to a wide range of phenomena. There is no simple agreement as to what should be studied as religious phenomena or whether there are methods of interrogation that are specific to the field.

The dissolution or relativizing of dominant religious and philosophical ideologies through the globalization of the field is a dispersion of formal unities that had at one time been unexamined and considered self-evident. In a postcolonial world the natural attitude is denaturalized and is now representative of specific cultures, classes and interests.

The field of religion presents itself as a heterogeneous field of incorrigibles, positivities, empiricities and multiplicities without a unifying discipline that we can fall back upon for orientation and

[1] Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. xi.
[2] Charles H. Long, Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 7.