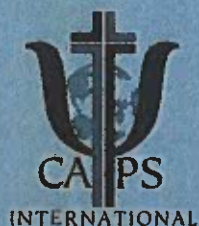


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Defining Religion: Strategies and Reflections on an Elusive Figure

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Religion to date has eluded adequate definition. This article explores the issue of defining religion in terms of different strategies employed that acknowledge the difficulties of definition. The history of the relations of psychology to religion, and in turn of science to religion, is discussed as one such strategy. A second strategy of rich description in place of a definition is examined, while the practice of operational definition within experimental psychology is evaluated as a third strategy. How these strategies provide insight into religion in lieu of an overarching description is discussed, while the lessons to be learned if these strategies are understood reflexively, as pointing back to the scientific inquirer, are summarized.

The point of man's religious life lies in man's being introduced in it to that which is without limits. Any attempt to conceptualize a religion is a contradiction in terms. (Smith, 1962, p. 141)

The Elusiveness of Religion: The Difficulties of Definition

Whether cave paintings, carved statues, astronomically inspired architectures, or ornaments buried with the dead, evidence of a religious orientation for human life is co-extensive with the oldest extant records of human activity. Given this legacy one might think that science would have satisfactory descriptions, categorizations, analyses, and explanations for religion. The truth is that religion continues to elude what might be considered the most rudimentary of scientific operations, that of a *definition*. Perhaps the problem is in the word "religion" itself: should one say instead religiosity, or faith, or spirituality? Should the focus be on religion's formal features—its rituals, doctrines, and institutions—or on aspects like devotion, piety, and worship as experienced by a religion's practitioners? Ought the scientist to include as essential the moral and ethical vision of life a religious orientation carries, or investigate its myths, values, and ideals independently of this vision? Or perhaps the only feasible definition of a religion is how it has defined itself over the generations as a living tradition—its history *is* its definition.

The want of an adequate and compelling definition for religion is not due to a lack of effort. Some of the attempts are justly famous, perhaps most notably Rudolf Otto's (1923) phenomenological characterization of religion in terms of a numinous experience of the "*mysterium tremendum*," the experience of an awe-some and awful, fascinating and terrifying, "Wholly Other" presence. William James' (1902) text *Varieties of Religious Experience* shares a similar reputation as a masterpiece on the topic largely due to James' extended and sympathetic treatment. Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1988/1799) describing religion as the "feeling of absolute dependence," and Paul Tillich's (1959) definition of religion as involving "questions of ultimate concern," are notable efforts to concisely delimit what is minimally essential to religion. Other attempts are, perhaps justly, equally infamous: whether Karl Marx's irreverent characterization of religion as the "opium of the masses," or in the audacious phrasing of Sigmund Freud, "religion as the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity." In every case, whether respectful or not, these attempts at definition have the merit of affording insight into essential features of the complex physiognomy designated by the term religion; but by the same token each can be criticized for falling short of any comprehensive capture of the full range, nuance, and multiple valences of the meaning of religion.

A review of the literature reveals that attempts to define religion follow a conventional pattern. First, religion is asserted to be complex and significant, worthy of respect and the attention of science. This sets the stage for an assertion of the need to define it in order to make some scientific headway into its complexity. There is then a brief review of previous "classic" definitions

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(such as Otto's, Freud's, Tillich's, and so on). Features of religion that the definitions highlight are briefly discussed, but the focus of the discussions is rightfully on their shortcomings: each definition invariably leaves out some crucial aspect of religion. The conclusion appears inevitable and reiterates the introductory comments: religion is complex, all definitions have proven partial and inadequate, and the definition to be proposed will suffer the same fate—but a definition is needed in order to do research. A provisional definition is then proposed. Based on this recurring pattern evident in the literature, the lesson seems to be that the aspiration to universality required of an adequate scientific definition proves consistently frustrated by the wealth and diversity of examples of religious phenomena, both cross-cultural and historical. Provisionally at least, it implies that to accept any definition as definitive will prove to *reduce* religion to something lesser. Religion eludes definition.

The elusiveness of religion and repeated failure of definitional attempts could suggest on the one hand that the attempt at definition is misguided from the outset and on the other that to review these attempts at definition is unfruitful. This two-fold suggestion is premature. Just because a definition fails to capture the totality of what religion is does not mean a definition's failure is therefore also total! Any single definition may fail to capture the full complexity of religion, but the very activity of critically considering inadequate definitions helps convey some concretely felt sense of what religion *is* about as well as acknowledge the seemingly necessary limitations to the definition. As this article attempts to bear out, the most insightful lesson to be learned proves to be a *reflexive* one: the process of recognizing the inadequacy of any particular definition of religion involves the reflexive acknowledgement of the presuppositions we assume when we approach religion. Nielsen et al. (1988) make the point succinctly in arguing that the notion that religion is a self-sufficient entity amenable to analysis is a Western presupposition.

Given these difficulties of definition, a few strategies suggest themselves. One strategy is to opt for analysis of the *history* of the discourses on religion in the hope of discerning some pattern, progress, or conclusion that would shed some light on either the nature of religion or the nature of the difficulties surrounding definition.

A second strategy would be to eschew definition altogether, focusing instead on a rich *description* of religious phenomena (as in phenomenological studies, for example). This strategy raises the question of the aim of science and resumes long-standing debate regarding the weak status of "mere description" as opposed to stronger objective criteria of explanation, prediction and control, causality, and so on. A third strategy which proceeds from that criticism begins with the apparently pragmatic argument for a modest role for definition that seems straightforward: the intention to provide a focus to narrow down what possibilities are under consideration. However, the strategy of "operationally defining" religion in specific, narrow, and quantifiable terms carries its own significant limitations that demand critical reflection on its rationale and presuppositions. The remainder of this article explores each strategy in turn.

First Strategy: History of the Relationship of Psychology and Science to Religion

Given the inadequateness of a definition for religion, one strategy is to examine instead the history of the relationship of psychology to religion (Buchanan, 2003; Richards, 1998). The short history of psychology as a formal institutionalized discipline, however, makes it difficult to gain any type of overarching perspective. Further, the dividedness of psychology within itself makes for a multiplicity of perspectives beyond the scope of the present article to summarize in any detail.

I will deal with the latter difficulty of the dividedness within psychology first, as best addressed through a glance at a psychology of religion textbook. Wulff (1997), for example, breaks down the great variety of psychological approaches to religion into three "clusters" (p. 18): depth-psychological approaches, humanistic approaches, and objective approaches. The first cluster, depth-psychological approaches, developed within the clinical practice of the treatment of patients as initiated by Freud's psychoanalysis. These approaches describe religion in the first person using the subject's point of view. However, they interpret this content through the lens of psychodynamic assumptions, bypassing the subject's conscious understanding to offer explanations of religion in terms of unconscious processes inaccessible to the subject but accessible through theory. Of central concern and interest to these approaches are the irrational components of religion. In addition to Freudian psychoanalysis,

other depth-psychological approaches include ego psychology, object-relations theory, and Carl Jung's analytical psychology. The second cluster of approaches, humanistic, also describes religion in the first person from the subject's point of view but with the emphasis on how religion is significant in the conscious experience of the subject. These approaches are least preoccupied with strict adherence to a method or with explanation. Rather, they are primarily descriptive and are concerned instead with content and the principle of remaining faithful to the phenomenon as it is experienced. They argue against the adequacy of natural sciences inquiry for human phenomena and instead propose a human science model for psychology drawn from existential and phenomenological philosophies. William James and James Pratt represent early American work in the psychology of religion utilizing this approach; the humanistic and transpersonal psychology of figures such as Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Victor Frankl represent the more recent American form of this approach, while Germany has contributions from Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Eduard Spranger, and the Dorpat school. The third cluster, objective approaches, views religion from the outside as described in the third person. These approaches are modeled on the natural sciences, favor experimentation, and take place within the laboratory. They emphasize method at the expense of content so as to offer biological, neurological, behavioral, or correlational (statistical) explanations for religion, bypassing the subject's experience in favor of observable behaviors or biological processes.

It is clear from the variety of these approaches, and the significant differences between as well as within particular clusters, that there is no consensus as to how "psychology" has related to religion. A fundamental difference can be drawn in terms of their espousing, or not, the *validity of description in the first person* according to the subject's point of view. Depth-psychological approaches do so suspiciously, i.e., in terms of the theory of the unconscious, while humanistic approaches do so explicitly as an assumed human science principle. Objective approaches differ in this regard. In accordance with a natural science principle for gaining objectivity, they bypass the subject's description with the *aim of providing explanation*. Consequently, objective approaches require a clear definition of religion in their own terms, in a way not required for approaches more favorable to description. They accomplish this

goal through the practice of operational definition—a strategy which is examined below.

The other obstacle to historical examination of the relationship of psychology to religion is psychology's short history. However, the formal institutionalization of psychology in the late 1800s involved its explicit inclusion under the umbrella of science. Therefore the psychological investigation of religion can be seen as part and parcel of the ongoing consolidation of scientific investigation within modern Western societies and legitimates perceiving psychology's short history as the most recent installment of a more encompassing and long-standing drama, that of the relationship between *science* and religion. The controversy around a compelling definition of religion perhaps stems from a deeply-rooted disagreement between science and religion more generally—that is, the two orientations have always been antagonistic to each other. This view suggests that religion cannot be subject to the methods of science because it is something inherently "other."

Certainly the perception of the relationship between science and religion as one of *conflict* has been a popular and enduring one; the Copernican revolution, the trial of Galileo, and the debates sparked by evolution all come to mind as supporting evidence for this view. On the other hand, there is also much evidence to the contrary: that science and religion are in fact *complementary*. In stark opposition to the conflict thesis, the complementarity thesis argues that religion (i.e., Christianity) seeded scientific thought, while science informs and clarifies religion. There is evidence supporting both the conflict thesis and the complementarity thesis.¹ The assumption held in common by both is that "science" and "religion" designate singular domains independent of each other and are therefore in either a conflicting or harmonious relationship. That is, each reifies and hypostatizes fluid, dynamic, social-relational processes and activities into fixed entities. Following from this commonality, both theses are susceptible to the same criticism: that in order to support their reification of science and religion into two self-contained, autonomously enduring entities whose relation to the other then becomes focal, each thesis proves highly biased in its choice of evidence so as to support its view. Brooke and Cantor (1998) state, "Both theses are vulnerable because they are selective in their use of evidence. They gloss over the diversity and the complexity of positions

taken" (p. 20). Over against this polemic, Brooke and Cantor (1998) propose a *complexity* thesis as a better alternative. As Brooke (1991) puts it:

Serious scholarship in the history of science has revealed so extraordinarily rich and complex a relationship between science and religion in the past that general theses are difficult to sustain. The real lesson turns out to be the complexity. (p. 5)

That is, the relation between science and religion is neither necessarily oppositional nor necessarily harmonious, but contingent and situated. Proponents of particular viewpoints strategize and argue relative to a multiplicity of interests which must be disentangled; in the process of doing so the historian discovers neither necessity of either conflict or complementarity, nor autonomous domains readily labeled "science" and "religion," but context-specific actions intelligible relative to certain interpretations of ideals and norms. The complexity thesis has much going for it in contemporary terms: 1) it recognizes and promotes sensitivity for highly articulate analyses, 2) it promotes analyses closely tied to particular contexts and locales, and 3) it eschews grand theorizing.

The complexity thesis has *distinctive advantages* over both the conflict and complementarity theses in that it avoids antagonizing or apologizing for either side. Most significantly, the complexity thesis points the way to what Livingstone (1997) insightfully characterizes as the need for a "new cartography" that reconceptualizes the relations between science and religion. Ideally, this reconceptualization would preclude reifying science or religion into singular hypostatized entities and encourage thinking of each as overlapping or indistinguishable in some domains, complementing in other domains, entirely unrelated in some, or clashing and conflicting in yet others. The historical strategy for dealing with the problems of definition, then, suggests that psychology (science) and religion are each best considered *not as singular, reified entities*, but as multi-faceted, context-specific, and highly differentiated in their meaning. Thus, the historical perspective suggests that *both* science and religion need equally multi-faceted articulations and nuanced, differentiated, and highly self-conscious characterizations that necessarily precede, and might well preclude, attempts at definition.

Second Strategy: Rich Description

The second strategy that recommends itself to deal with the difficulties of defining religion is that of a rich description. As noted above, within the variety of psychological approaches to religion, both the depth-psychological and the humanistic approaches rely heavily upon description. This reliance upon description is shared with many disciplines outside psychology: whether the ethnographies of cultural anthropology, historical or comparative studies, philosophy, or theology. Noting that definitions fail to be compelling unless one accepts their reductionist implications, this reliance upon description is sensible. If to avoid reductionism one broadens the definition to render it all-inclusive, the result is a definition so vague, general, and effectively void of content that it necessitates the need for rich description to fill the lack. The work of comparative religionist Mircea Eliade (1957/1959; 1949/1954) perhaps exemplifies this best: his definition of religion in terms of a division between sacred and profane summarized as the human relation to the eternal is in itself vague and general, but accompanied as it is by his numerous and diverse examples throughout his work it becomes a rich characterization.

Alternately, depending upon which religious tradition is studied and what meaning of experience for practitioners is attendant upon this tradition, one could derive criteria for the religion's evaluation in its own indigenous terms. Religions carry their own distinctions. In general terms, these have been noted as the distinction between sacred and profane, between "this world" and the "other world," this life and the after life, between the secular and the spiritual, between the temporal and the eternal, between nature and grace, between exoteric and esoteric, and so on. In every case the distinction does not qualify as a definition but rather a relational conception that carries a contrastive significance; it is a clue to an attitude. Although this alternative seems maximally respectful of other traditions relative to the demand for a definition, it ultimately displaces the issue of definition onto equally problematic issues, such as the problem of translation, the problem of cross-cultural understanding, and so on.

Perhaps the only viable working solution in lieu of an adequate definition is captured by Nielsen et al.'s (1988) proposal: a list of twelve characteristics minimally criterial for any adequate definition of religion to include. The

aspects of religious life they list attempt to cover the gamut from belief to experience to formal features, in terms of content, form, process, psychological and social dynamics, and so on. While a list has the merit of laying out in succinct fashion the numerous parameters and properties any definition must possess, it does little in the way of clarifying distinctions, eliminating redundancies, or synthesizing them into a coherent perspective. A list of criteria does not substitute for a definition, but serves to make clear the numerous features required for a definition that aims to be comprehensive.

The descriptive strategy defers the necessity for a complete, formal definition and retains an essentially open-ended, unfinished, ongoing quality. The role of definition in the context of rich description is rather to provide some particular *focus* in order to gain a specific *insight*. For example, the very general definition of religion as "belief in a nonmaterial (spiritual) dimension" (Fontana, 2003, p. 8) would seem to be too general to be particularly useful, as using the terms "belief" and "spiritual" merely reintroduce the problems around definition. But if the definition is understood as providing a particular focus for the sake of a specific insight, rather than as a succinct and exhaustive characterization, it does display some limited usefulness. Although the terms "spirituality" and "religion" are not synonymous, there is considerable overlap—including considerable overlap in ambiguity. Spirituality is a term becoming increasingly popular in Western discourse in the last decades, primarily to designate a personal feeling intentionally detached from any institutional or organized forms (which religion possesses). This provides a two-sided insight. On the one hand, it is a clue to a fundamental tension within descriptions of religion: that between the personal, lived experience of the practitioner and the impersonal social structure of the particular religious organization. In a traditional religious context this tension might have political significance in terms of the oppressiveness of the latter, or the heterodox or possibly heretical significance of the former (e.g., as with certain forms of mysticism (cf. Underhill, 1955)). In W. C. Smith's (1962) classic work he argues this distinction to be central to the analysis of religion and suggests study would be better served through the use of the terms "faith" and "cumulative tradition" instead. On the other hand, the definition also affords insight reflexively. The increasing preference for the

term "spirituality" over "religion" attests that the distinction between personal experience and impersonal institution and tradition would find immediate purchase in a secular context. But this would be due to the *individualistic* value presupposed in separating a religion's traditional expression from an individual's experience. Like the "Western conceit" that religion is some delimitable entity, the definition of religion in terms of spirituality betrays a secular conceit.

Any scientific or analytic attempt that tries to define a religion in any but its own indigenous terms faces the possibility of a reflexive critique that redounds upon the definer. As other examples to make the point: cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz' (1966) definition of religion as a cultural symbol system composed to answer the unanswerable questions of life beyond our epistemological, emotional, or ethical reach, and sociologist Peter Berger's (1969) definition of religion as a "plausibility structure" are both insightful—as long as they are willing to refrain from judgments about the reality of religious content. In summary, then, the descriptive strategy recognizes the reductive limitations implied in any definition of religion. It denies any definitive status to any particular definition, opting instead for principally open-ended description. This strategy allows definition to serve one particular function: it can frame inquiry into religion and afford *insight relative to the assumptions it presupposes*.

Third Strategy: Defining Religion Operationally

The third strategy for dealing with the difficulties of definition through providing "operational definitions" is underwritten by the desire for gaining an objective knowledge that bypasses the open-endedness of history and description as well as the subjective bias of the subject's experiential understanding. Usually the marker for objective knowledge is that it provides some explanatory capacity for the phenomenon investigated, measured by its ability to predict and control the presence of the phenomenon through manipulation of the conditions that cause its appearance. This orientation sets objective approaches apart from other approaches within psychology, and also ups the ante on the need for a definition.

The established convention within experimental psychology to deal with this need is a pragmatic, methodological one: to restrict the scope

of a definition to a narrowly delimited focus determined relative to a particular research project. The definition is "operationalized." This means the methods and procedures used in the particular research investigation, as the means the psychologist employs to assess a phenomenon, are operations through which the phenomenon investigated is constituted. Stress is placed on these operations—such as experimental manipulations or statistical analyses of questionnaires—being public. The effects of operations are verifiable through reproduction, they are preferably quantifiable or capable of measure, and can be assessed by others (i.e., intersubjectively). The reasoning is that these operations together define the phenomenon studied, and this definition is the basis for the claim of the study to be objective in that the operational effects can be examined for their reliability and validity. Operational definition lies at the center of the methodology of experimental psychology; it formalizes in technical terms the practical consensus of a psychological investigative community. Psychologists go out of their way to stress the necessity of operational definition as a first step in investigation; for example, when Spilka, Hood, Jr., Hunsberger, and Gorsuch in *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (2003), "emphasize operational definition of different aspects or forms of faith [because] *this is the only way we can understand religion from a scientific standpoint*" (p. 11, emphasis added) they represent the received view of experimental psychology.

Psychology's rationale for operational definition appears plausible. Interestingly, critical evaluations of the practice of operational definition in psychology—how operational definition is actually used—turn this appearance on its head. This turn takes on an extraordinarily ironic sense in relation to "defining religion": for its critics argue that operational definition serves an essentially *religious* function for its practitioners (in the pejorative sense of an uncritically examined ritualistic observance). Leahey (1980) talks of the "myth of operationism"; Danziger (1990) uses the term "methodolatry"; Bickhard (1992) calls operational definition a "myth of science," while Green (1992) describes psychologists' adherence to the notion as an "article of faith." Sigmund Koch (1992) characterizes operational definition as a "doctrine." Put simply, the issue that the explicit rationale for operational definition glosses over but on which criticism focuses, turns on whether a meaning, or

components of a meaning, can be in any way equivalent to, or fixed by, an (objective) operation or set of operations. Proponents of operational definition claim this equivalence through implication or by assumption alongside the additional claim that this equivalence is essential to a scientific standpoint. Critics distinguish these two claims carefully. Over against the first (the equivalence of meaning to an operation), they draw on the consensus reached through empirical analyses of scientific practice: that the meaning ascribed to an investigated phenomenon, as constituted through the sophisticated and technical interpretive work of scientists, depends on the standards, conventions, and discourses of the scientific community investigating the phenomenon. To claim the meaning of the phenomenon is defined through observable operations enables the interpretive framework composed through these standards, conventions, and discourses, to disappear from conscious scrutiny and fade into the background. The conclusion drawn by its critics is that operational definition does *not* formalize an existing consensus, but creates an *apparent agreement on the meaning* of a phenomenon through a hypothesis as to what the psychology community's consensus *ought* to be. The practice of operational definition by experimental psychologists carries a primarily *ideological* force: it hides the metaphysical framework of assumptions, presuppositions, and beliefs that understands meaning as reducible to causal mechanisms while presenting itself as the practical and necessary step for proceeding in an unbiased fashion (Polkinghorne, 1983). That its practitioners espouse it as essential to psychology's aspirations to provide objective findings while its critics describe it as held on unexamined grounds akin to those of the religious faith of a believer suggests that the notion of "operationally defining religion" is less a distinctive empirical strategy and more an ideological concern within the politics of psychology as a discipline over what does, and what does not, count as legitimate science. Viewed critically, the strategy of operational definition does not bypass the problems encountered by the historical or descriptive strategies, but hides and postpones them.

Conclusion: Irreducibility of Religion or Limits to Science?

Defining religion without reducing it proves inordinately difficult. Religion continues to elude definition. Is this elusiveness of religion to be

attributed to some shortcoming of psychology (or any human science more generally)—to its youthfulness, its immaturity, its underdeveloped status? Or is it due to the complexity of religion as a subject matter? The two perspectives expressed through these questions differ in that the first question implies it is only a matter of time before religion will be adequately defined, while the second suggests that adequate definition is *in practice* impossible. That is, each is apologetic. Each assumes a basic faith—in the progress of science or the resilience of religion respectively. In a sense these questions are two sides of the same coin: they defer the issue of defining religion into the future, but according to opposing rationales. Regardless of how one flips the coin, the deeper problematic that the two perspectives presuppose and which emerges upon reflection is whether scientific inquiry has, or ought to have, any limits. If it does not, the apologists for science win and it will only be a matter of time before religion is defined and explained. If it does, the apologists for religion win and time will reveal the legitimate limits to science.

The latter perspective points to the possibility of a yet more radical understanding of the issue: adequate definition of religion is impossible *in principle*—religion eludes definition because there is an element in it *irreducible* to analysis, investigation, observation, testing, criticism, and so on. Put differently, religion proves irreducible relative to all those reductive operations characteristic of scientific work. Behind the seemingly innocuous demand for a definition of religion, the proposition of an irreducible element to religion reflexively raises a concern with the *limits to science*—a concern that presses itself with ever-increasing urgency in contemporary times as science and technology insinuate themselves ever more comprehensively into our lives. Interpreted reflexively, each strategy for dealing with the issues around defining religion reveals a particular limit. The historical strategy revealed reflexively that “psychology,” “science,” and “religion” if treated as reified singularities begs the issue of definition precisely in how the issue is set up, and suggests that treating each as divided, multi-levelled domains of discourse unfolding over time will yield alternate conceptions of their relations. The descriptive strategy revealed reflexively that definition understood as a form of inquiry can be insightful relative to the assumptions presupposed in the question. Lastly, the operational strategy revealed reflex-

ively that behind the avowed rationale of psychology's treating religion objectively there is ongoing ideological controversy inseparable from the politics of the discipline. The defining of religion is not merely about a scientific attempt to analyze an “interesting phenomenon”; it exposes our past mistakes, our particular prejudices and our self-interests. Can we learn to consider history as the slow elaboration of human understanding rather than a record of past mistakes to be superceded? Can we take “mere description” seriously? Can we critically inform our scientific practices through reflection? If defining religion as an activity is inseparable from these efforts, then it seems feasible to view definition not as an inevitably reductionistic ambition, but as a noble effort to enrich our appreciation of that elusive figure, “religion”—and hopefully gain some understanding and humility about ourselves in the process, too.

Note

1 John Draper's 1874 *History of the conflict between religion and science* and Andrew White's 1896 *A history of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom* (White, 1965/1896) exemplify the conflict thesis—and their original dates of publication provide an important clue as to when the thesis comes into vogue. For examination of the nineteenth century reception by Protestantism of evolutionary theory, see esp. Moore (1979). For studies of the importance of Christianity for the development of science, see Hooykaas (1972), Klaaren (1977), Merton (1938/1970), and Cohen (1990); for the reverse (that science returns the favor and complements religion), see Dillenberger (1961), and Westfall (1958). Brooke (1991), Brooke and Cantor (1998), and Livingstone (1997) provide excellent overviews of both theses.

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