

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

---

THE STUDY  
OF RELIGION

---

*Edited by*

MICHAEL STAUSBERG

*and*

STEVEN ENGLER

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Oxford University Press 2016

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First published 2016

First published in paperback 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-872957-0 (Hbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-872958-7 (Pbk.)

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and  
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials  
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

## CHAPTER 1

---

# DEFINITION

---

MICHAEL STAUSBERG AND MARK Q. GARDINER

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

---

- There are differences of opinion over whether defining religion is necessary or even possible.
- There are two common methods of defining: extension and intension; the former takes the empirical as its starting point, the latter the conceptual; these methods are not mutually exclusive.
- The relation between the expression to be defined (the *definiendum*) and the expression doing the defining (the *definiens*) can be conceived of as either an equivalence or an elucidation.
- Definitions address the word and the thing and their mutual relationships; definitional lexicalism assigns priority to the word; definitional objectualism seeks to determine the thing.
- Definitions are based on underlying theories of meaning; a crucial semantic distinction is that between meaning realism, which sees meanings as fully determinate, and meaning antirealism, which sees meanings as in principle indeterminate.
- The positions resonate with different types (as opposed to methods) of definitions (real, lexical, and stipulative).
- Substantive and functionalist definitions of religion have limitations which suggests the value of combining them.
- Similarly, both definitions requiring the necessary presence of one or several criteria (so-called monothetic definitions) and those that require only some portion of the list of criteria (so-called polythetic definitions) each have limitations; homeostatic property cluster definitions are a possible alternative.
- Definitions of religion are not value-free; they are often implicated in power structures both inside and outside of the academy (for example in legal and political contexts).

There are innumerable attempts at defining 'religion,' both in various branches of the academy and beyond. Much ink has been spilled over the topic (see the Further Reading section at the end of this chapter) and the discussion continues (see, e.g. Bruce 2011; Schilbrack 2013; Frankenberry 2014; Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014), though one might think that "any attempt at definition is futile" (Stringer 2008, 3). Some introductory books (see, e.g. McCutcheon 2007; Jensen 2014) and earlier handbooks or companions (see, e.g. Arnal 2000; Droogers 2009; Greil 2009) dedicate a chapter or a section to the problem. The appendix to this chapter samples some influential and noteworthy classical and contemporary definitions proposed by scholars (see Dubuisson 2003, 57–63 and Greil 2009 for larger samples). A commentator has observed there to be a "gulf . . . between those scholars who think that arguments about definitions are very important and those of us who believe that some loosely commonsensical conceptualization of religion is sufficient to allow us to get on with our primary purpose of exploring its sociologically interesting features" (Bruce 2011, 118). In fact, "[m]ost scholars of religion do not develop a definition of religion" (Platvoet 1999a, 252), and even some theoreticians of religion have failed to propose (e.g. Rappaport 1999) or refused to suggest definitions of religion. Among classical theorists, Max Weber, at the beginning of his study of religious communities, stated that a definition of religion cannot be made at the outset of such a study, but, if at all, only at the end (Weber 1993 [1920], 1).

## TO DEFINE OR NOT TO DEFINE

Weber's case points to two distinct functions of definitions in the research process. In the first stage, one needs to delimit the subject area under investigation. This recalls the etymology of 'definition,' which derives from the Latin verb *definire* (*de+finire*), meaning 'to limit, end.' The most frequent ancient Greek term translated as 'definition' derives from *ὄρισμα* (*horisma*), literally a marked boundary in an earth-measuring sense. It is the origin of the English 'horizon,' that which marks off the celestial from the terrestrial, or the heavenly from the mundane. In this sense, a definition delimits the range of the subject in question. Often such definitions are made implicitly; in such cases, making them explicit increases the transparency of the study.

In contrast to the claim that a definitional delineation of religion is necessary to make religious studies possible are two opposing views: that definitions of religion are not, in fact, necessary for the study of religion; and that definitions of religion are impossible (see Bergunder 2014, 248). For the former view, one might think that religion is simpler, clearer, and more common or intuitive than suggested by any of the characteristics used to define it: there may simply be no need to define it. In response, the sheer number and diversity of attempts to define religion suggest that it is not a simple, clear, or intuitive idea. At the same time, the multitude of extant definitions has been thought to index

its indefinability, at the same time showing that the expression can be defined in many ways (Smith 1998, 281). Others point out that almost no other discipline seems to feel the need to define their subject matter. Bergunder (2014, 252), for example, claims that literary scholars seldom define 'literature,' nor music scholars 'music,' nor art historians 'art.' In response it might be recognized that some disciplines do concern themselves with this question, the rise of meta-philosophy in recent years being a prominent example. Secondly, definitional questions of the sort that Bergunder mentions are certainly asked by at least non-academics, especially in the context of attempting to delineate problematic cases (Is D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* literature or pornography? Is thrash metal music or noise? Is Duchamp's *Fountain* art or plumbing?). Such things as art, football (aka soccer), nationalism, veganism, environmentalism, and even atheism are routinely referred to as religions, and at some point scholars will be asked their views; from time to time administrators and courts also require definitions of religion (see section "After all: Why define?").

On a theoretical level, the need to define religion is challenged by some 'critical' theorists who insist that there is simply no such 'thing' as religion. This call ranges from those who hold that ultimately the religious reduces to the sociological, anthropological, economic, political, etc. (Arnal/McCutcheon 2013), to those who claim that 'religion' is primarily a creation of the academy (Smith 1998), and to those who think that while it might be applicable to a particular historical context—namely post-Reformation Protestantism and the rise of the modern nation state—its expansion beyond that is Eurocentric, imperialistic, and called into question by postcolonial critique (Dubuisson 2003; but see Casadio, "Historicizing and Translating Religion," this volume). Some conclude that instead of attempting to define religion the study of religion should focus its efforts elsewhere: to "focus on deconstructing the category and analyzing its function within popular discourse" (Arnal 2000, 30); to abandon "the tendency to regard religion as a relatively well-defined object" and instead examine "critically the social processes whereby certain things are counted as religious" (Beckford 2003, 2–3); to treat religion "not as a characteristic that inheres in certain phenomena, but as a cultural resource over which competing interest groups may vie" and to view religion as "a claim, made by certain groups and, in some cases, contested by others" (Greil 2009, 148); or to shift the focus to a study of "a consensus-capable, contemporary, everyday understanding of 'religion'" (Bergunder 2014, 246). While we neither oppose nor endorse those positions in this chapter, the inference from them to the impossibility of defining religion rests on a particular assumption about definitions—namely that only real things can be defined—which is somewhat controversial (see the discussion of 'real definitions' later in this chapter). In other words, even those who question the necessity or propriety of defining religion presuppose certain definitions of religion and certain definitions of definition.

Assuming that a definition of religion is possible, questions about the strategies of its construction are unavoidable. Defining something that exhibits considerable diversity in actual cases, like religion (and many other things), involves a blend of the empirical

and the conceptual. Both these dimensions pose problems in their own right, i.e. which empirical materials and which concepts to draw on. This resonates with two common general strategies for constructing a definition of religion.

Taking the empirical as its point of departure, the method of extension (named from the term in logic for the range of things to which the use of a word is extended, sometimes called denotation) would identify an intuitively plausible range of observed things uncontroversially labeled as religions or qualified as religious, and distil a statement of what they appear to have in common. Starting from the conceptual, on the other hand, the method of intension (named from the term in logic for the criteria by which something is to be included in a word's extension, sometimes called connotation) builds on an intuitively plausible conception of what delimits the religious from the non-religious, and sorts through actual cases accordingly. Each of these methods, which start with intuitive preconceptions, allow for modification and re-tooling in light of further reflection and a growing body of empirical materials. For example, provisional definitions for the first can be tested against, and modified accordingly, an expanding list of examples starting from the contextual variety of religions the scholar is most familiar with from her or his own academic and non-academic experience. Provisional definitions obtained by the second method can be modified in light of how easy or difficult it is to fit cases into the model. These methods are not mutually exclusive and are typically combined.

## MEANINGS OF DEFINITION: THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

---

### Conceptions of the Definitional Relation: Equivalence or Elucidation

Linguistically, definitions are sentences that link a *definiendum* (expression to be defined) to a *definiens* (expression that does the defining). Because these are expressed merely as strings of words, there is nothing in a proposed definition itself that indicates whether the link is to be conceived of either (i) as an equivalence or (ii) as an elucidation. In the case of definitions as equivalences (i) the *definienda* are taken to be semantically equivalent to *definiens* in the sense that each is essentially an unequivocal stylistic variant of the other (such as defining 'sister' as 'female sibling'), whereas (ii) in the other conception *definiens* are taken to elucidate the *definienda* in the sense of clarifying, or explaining, the meaning for example to one who is not already familiar with the term, when novel, revisionary, precisising, or unusual meanings are intended, or when ambiguities need to be resolved. The distinction between these two conceptions of definition can only be drawn on the basis of the underlying assumptions and intentions of the definer (not always open to view) or its pragmatic use, especially the

inferences drawn from it. When a definition is conceived of as expressing an equivalence, it is assumed that the things to which the *definiendum* applies are only the things to which the *definiens* applies, and vice versa. In this way a *definiens*, usually more linguistically complex than the *definiendum*, can be seen as supplying a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the application of the *definiendum*. When Schilbrack's definition of religion as "forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical" (2013, 313) is viewed as expressing an equivalence, it can be inferred that all religions are forms of life, that all religions are committed to the reality of the superempirical, and that anything that is a form of life committed to the reality of the superempirical is thereby a religion. This definition can be critiqued by way of a counterexample: some logicians regard the logical properties (tautological, contrary, valid, etc.) as real, knowable, but inaccessible to the senses, and assert that we have an (intellectual) duty to correctly apprehend them in order to adjust our inferential 'forms of life'; is formal logic then a religion? On the other hand when a definition is proposed and received in elucidatory terms, failure of the applicability of the *definiens* does not logically entail failure of the applicability of the *definiendum*, or vice versa. When Schilbrack's definition is viewed as elucidatory, the counterexample is not as threatening. Rather, both 'form of life' and 'reality of the superempirical' can be viewed as offering a sound and useful way of understanding religion's, at least in the context in which the definition is advanced.

Failure of the definer, or readers, to understand which definitional conception is assumed, may lead to drawing faulty inferences and giving misdirected criticisms. For example, consider the fact that Schilbrack offers two distinct (that is, inequivalent) definitions of religion: "normative practices that at least implicitly make ontological claims in terms of which the practical norms are authorized" (2013, 306) and "forms of life predicated on the reality of the superempirical" (2013, 313). The temptation to accuse him of inconsistency seems relevant only under an equivalence conception. Seen under an elucidatory model they can be both seen as valuable within their specific contexts. Indeed, Schilbrack intends his latter definition to subsume the main insights of the former one, and so the introduction of a second definition is better understood as refining an elucidation rather than replacing an equivalence claim.

For another example, consider how definitions of religion are often used differently inside and outside of the academy. Scholarly offerings tend towards an elucidatory model in that they are often offered as contributing towards improving our understanding of the subject matter itself. On the other hand, definitions asked for outside of the academy, such as in judicial or political settings (see section "After all: Why define?"), tend towards asking for a equivalence-informed taxonomy aimed at giving a definitive (pun intended) mechanism for deciding whether this or that is or is not a religion, for example to help determine what is and is not legally protected. Academics often resent the simplifying directives, whereas non-academics may lose confidence that the academics really know what they're talking about. What is the point of studying religion for a lifetime without even knowing what it is—or is it the other way around: studying something for a lifetime makes its contours even fuzzier?

## Conceptions of *Definienda*: Objectual or Lexical

A second point of potential confusion involves differing conceptions of the nature of *definienda*; do definitions define words or things? In a syntactic sense, definitions have words as their *definienda*, but from a semantic point of view, given that words have meanings, definitions may be held to refer to things. One may call these two options *definitional lexicalism* versus *definitional objectualism*. Both options have been championed by prominent contemporary philosophers. Tyler Burge, for example, insists on the priority of what he calls “metaphysical or essence-determining definitions,” a variety of objectual definitions; for Burge (1993, 314) a “metaphysically correct definition” is one that “states actual necessary and sufficient conditions” for instantiations of a kind. In the study of religion, many would be skeptical regarding such an undertaking, since there seems to be a widespread incredulity towards the feasibility of such an operation and a suspicion of the political entanglements of essentialist claims (see Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014 for a discussion). Willard Van Orman Quine, on the other hand, held that lexical definitions are prior to objectual ones: “The one way of talking of definition reduces to the other, since we define men by defining ‘man’” (Quine 1987, 44). By analogy, we define religions by defining the word ‘religion.’ Several scholars have doubted that there is such a thing as religion (see section “To define or not to define”), and that we can only speak of the word: i.e. there is no thing called religion; it is a reified product of our language or of discursive practices engaging the word. Yet, even if one insists on the discursive or cognitive construction of both religion as a thing and ‘religion’ as a word, discursive or imaginary entities also qualify as things in the wider sense. This is especially so when they are held to be observable entities with specific properties ascribed with an agentic quality.

### Specifying the *Definiens*

Definitions are potentially undermined by the presence of vague, ambiguous, or mysterious terms in the *definiens*. For example, defining religion by reference to experiences of the holy or the numinous is in danger of explaining the complex (religion) by reference to the obscure (the holy). This is less of a problem under an equivalence model, though, since claiming the ontological identity of two notions is not challenged by their respective obscurity—it is their identity that counts. Under the elucidation model, however, which aims at epistemic relationships between two expressions, it is desirable that the *definiens* be better understood than the *definienda*. By often failing to do so, definitions have a tendency to proliferate the need for further definitions.

## DEFINITIONS AND SEMANTIC THEORY

Given that *definiens* are intended to express the meanings of the *definienda*, either as an equivalence or an elucidation, definitions are theoretically impacted by the underlying

theory of meaning (see Gardiner/Engler, "Semantics," this volume). One crucial distinction is that between meaning realism and antirealism.

Meaning realism is the view that meanings, at least in a given context, are fully determinate. In other words, it posits that there is an objective fact of the matter concerning what a given expression means in a given context. Meaning realist views include such positions as that meaning is fixed by the intentions of the speaker (Paul Grice), by the conventions of a linguistic community (David Lewis), by how it is used within a linguistic community (the later Ludwig Wittgenstein), or by its syntactic structure (Noam Chomsky). There are two main types of meaning realists: those who regard the determinate meanings as fixed by the relation of the expression to extra-linguistic reality (externalism) and those who regard them as independent of relations to such a reality (internalism).

Meaning antirealism, on the other hand, is the view that meanings, even in single contexts, have indeterminate, or a range of non-equivalent, meanings. There is no single fact of the matter concerning what a given expression means. Meaning antirealists need not be either meaning relativists (holding that meanings are subjectively made up) or meaning nihilists (holding that meaning is an empty or explanatorily useless notion). In contrast to these two positions, one can hold that there is no single thing that can be identified as *the* meaning of an expression, there are many things that can be eliminated as possible candidates for its meaning. Two prominent meaning antirealists, W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson, argue this view on the basis of a prior commitment to semantic holism, a philosophical view that sees the meaning of any linguistic expression as being a function, at least in part, of the meaning of others (as opposed to semantic atomism, which sees meaning as directly embedded in linguistic expressions themselves). Quine and Davidson argue that there will always be more than one possible meaning equally supported by all of the available interpretative evidence.

A practical difference with respect to definitions is that meaning realists will think of definitions in terms of being true or false, depending on whether they express the meaning-determining facts, whereas meaning antirealists will think of them in terms of being better or worse, depending on whether they allow for the range of interpretations supported by the evidence while excluding those precluded by it. According to the meaning realists, there can only be one correct definition of religion; for meaning antirealists, there can be several. Acknowledging the indeterminacy of definition runs counter to the agenda of definitions to delimit and to create semantic boundaries; on this view, definitions would be unbounded and open up semantic relations rather than closing them off.

Prior commitment, whether realized or not, to either meaning realism (and more specifically externalism or internalism) or meaning antirealism has profound implications with respect to what *types* of definitions are admissible. Even though one of the co-authors of this chapter (Gardiner) endorses antirealist and holistic semantics (while Stausberg remains uncommitted), this chapter is not meant to advocate for any philosophical position in particular, but to unpack the philosophical choices often made when engaging in reflections on definitions of religion (or of anything else).

## TYPES OF DEFINITION

The literature suggests distinctions between different types of definitions, which to some extent similarly reflect different underlying theories of meaning.

### Real, Lexical, and Stipulative Definitions

What are often called real definitions purport that the definitional criteria are satisfied by the objects in and of themselves. In other words, the objects to which the *definienda* of real definitions apply are thought to have an objective existence whose identity conditions are intrinsic to the things themselves—they are discovered, not invented—and the definition tries to state criteria which delineate them from other objects in precisely the way determined by the objective facts. This is the type of definition favored by various forms of ontological realists who tend towards meaning realism of the external variety: e.g. a real definition of biological species will attempt to state the objective criteria by which one species is ontologically distinct from another; and a real definition of moral goodness will attempt to state that which objectively distinguishes things that are morally good from those that are not. Real definitions, then, are objectively true or false.

In our context, real definitionists of religion take it to be a real thing, instantiated in the myriad religions found around the world. It is what they all have in common, their essence, which transcends any particular case (or even all of them) and which is the proper object of definition. Few scholars of religion today are tempted by such an understanding of their subject matter, though this appears to be a common way of reading Mircea Eliade. However, commitment to a real definition of religion need not be a commitment to the ontological *sui genericity* of religion. A Durkheimian reduction of the religious to the social (holding that god-talk is really society-talk in disguise) is just as committed to the reality of religion as an Eliadean one. It is also significant that many by adherents seem to view their religion in such objective terms: religion is typically taken by adherents to have a transcendent reality on its own, rather than being a product of human design.

A further classical real definition is the one by Geertz (see appendix) in that religion is characterized by an objectively specified system of symbols. Real definitions have generally been conceived by adopting the Aristotelian/Scholastic rule: *definitio fi(a)t per genus proximum et differentiam specificam*; i.e. a definition points to the category of things that the thing to be defined belongs to (*genus proximum*) and the distinctive features that make it specific (*differentia specifica*). Some would agree that religion is a specific subtype of culture, system of symbols, worldview, taxonomy, or discourse. Durkheim's definition (see appendix) is an example of such a definition; if something is not a "unified system," for example, or is not "relative to sacred things," it will not qualify as a religion.

Meaning realists of the internalist variety tend towards lexical definitions, which aim at giving a description of the ways a term is used in a linguistic community. Like the real definitions favored by the externalist variety, such definitions are true or false, though unlike them they are made so by intersubjective considerations of how communities use their language. Depending on the authority ascribed to the lexicon in a given linguistic community—consider the *Oxford English Dictionary* for speakers of English or the *Duden* for speakers of German—some such collections of definitions have normative power, because different ways of using an expression can be resisted by referring to them. Bergunder suggests that scholars of religion implicitly use an “unexplained” and “contemporary, everyday understanding of religion” that is “widely regarded as capable of consensus and goes largely undisputed” (Bergunder 2014, 252). It is this implicit “consensual definition” which, he argues, delimits the “undisclosed subject matter of religious studies” (255). In other words, he claims that there is a single universally accepted implicit definition lurking behind the myriad explicit ones on offer, and that it is the one doing the real work.

Lexical definitions can be contrasted with another meaning realist form of definition—stipulative definitions—in which definers introduce novel or unusual uses for a term within a given linguistic context such as a book. Here the connection to meaning realism is most stark, as stipulations tend towards a full determination of the *definiendum*'s meaning, at least in the context of use intended by the stipulator. Here there is not so much a question of whether the definition is accurate or inaccurate as whether it does useful work in the context and whether those invited choose to accept it or not. William James's introduction of his definition of religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a classic example: “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us . . .” (James 1958 [1902], 24). One danger of stipulative definitions, especially when using familiar *definienda*, is that definers or readers may equivocate between the stipulated meaning and more familiar ones.

## Substantive and Functional Definitions

In the study of religion's, a recurrent distinction is that between so-called functionalist and substantive definitions (with either type being potentially real, lexical, or stipulative). Simply put, functional definitions focus on what religions do and substantialist definitions on what religions are (what was earlier called their morphology).

Substantive definitions aim at delineating the content of the religious from that of the non-religious. A glance at the definitions in the appendix show purported reference to such things as: spiritual beings (Tylor), the holy (Otto), the sacred (Durkheim, Droogers), an unseen order (James), superhuman agents (Spiro, Jensen, Frankensberry), counterintuitive worlds (Atran). Besides the fact that these latter terms are not without ambiguity, critics have pointed out that such attempts face obvious counterexamples in two ways: for most proposed substantive criteria, (i) there are things commonly recognized as religions which lack them (such as Theravada Buddhism with respect to the

ultimate importance of superhuman agents), and (ii) there are things commonly recognized as non-religions which have them (such as spiritual beings in fairy stories or counterintuitive worlds in science fiction). In other words, finding a single set of substantive features which all religions but only religions have has proven quite elusive.

That has provided impetus to those who seek to define religion in functional terms, most commonly either socially (e.g. Durkheim) or individually (e.g. Tillich), both offering classical functional definitions, which allows for “an openness to religious diversity and without limitation on or presuppositions about the nature of the religious reality” (Schilbrack 2013, 294). Tweed’s definition of religions (see appendix) as organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering is a contemporary example of a functional definition. Some have rejected functional definitions entirely as committing the ‘functionalist fallacy’ (inferring that *y* causally explains *x* from the fact that *x* may function to produce *y*—e.g. that the need for social cohesion can cause religions to arise as religions may cause social cohesion), though the jury is still out concerning whether there is a genuine fallacy here. Others have more specifically critiqued functionalist definitions of religion by pointing out that they (i) leave out that which practitioners often take as the most important aspects of their religion, (ii) are too static, ignoring historical change, or (iii) are far too broad in that they become unspecific, vague, and include things that many would agree would not reasonably fall into the category (see, e.g. Fitzgerald 1997, 92–93; Riesebrodt 2010, xi). Moreover it has turned out that well-known functionalist definitions in fact also comprise substantive features (Bruce 2011)—Durkheim’s definition, for example, combines functional and substantive elements. Yet, there are some influential definitions—in particular by Tylor and Spiro—that are purely substantive (see also Snoek 1999; Flood 2012; Jensen 2014 for recent examples).

To overcome these limitations, some have sought a two-aspect approach, including both substantive and functional elements as aspects of their definitions of religion (see Pollack 1995 and Schilbrack 2013 for explicit strategies of this kind). To some extent this combination is a logical extension of both types of definitions: on the one hand, if religion is defined substantially, one can assume that people will only invest their resources in religion and transmit it to future generations if it does effective work, so that substantial definitions require functionality; on the other hand, functional definitions identify a problem religion is assumed to address or resolve (e.g. death, suffering, contingency, cohesion), which gives functional definitions a substantive dimension.

## Monothetic and Polythetic Definitions

Monothetic definitions require satisfaction of a single criterion, whether one feature/property or a conjunction of them, for application of the *definiendum*. Tylor’s definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings (see appendix) is a classic example of a simple monothetic definition, while Lincoln’s definition—in which religion comprises four domains: specific types of discourse and related forms of practice, community, and

institutions—is a contemporary example of a complex one (see appendix). Monothetic definitions can be objectual or lexical, substantive, or functional.

Developments in philosophy—in particular Wittgenstein’s posthumously published investigations on a theory of language and his metaphor of ‘family resemblance’ (1972 [1953])—and in various natural sciences such as evolutionary theory, bacteriology, botany, and zoology have challenged this classical way of thinking of classification and definition. Those developments suggest an alternative to monothetic taxonomy—polythetic classification—which has also proven influential outside of their original contexts, especially social anthropology (Needham 1975), and, with some delay, the study of religion\’s (Snoek 1994; Saler 2000 [1993]; 2008). Polythetic definitions are similar to complex monothetic ones in that their *definiens* mention more than one criterion, but they differ from them in that there is no necessity that the things to which *definienda* apply satisfy all of the criteria. The basic principle is that satisfaction of some portion suffices for application of the *definiendum*. For example, in Lincoln’s definition of a ‘proper religion’ (see appendix), networks or groups that have practices and communities grounded in religious discourses but lack institutions would not be considered a ‘proper’ religion, while a potential polythetic revision of this definition could allow for some subset of these characteristics, be it one, two, or three of them, to index the *definiendum*. With a monothetic approach, the question of whether a thing falls under the definition is an either-or one. With a polythetic approach, it is a more-or-less one: the more of the criteria satisfied, the more secure the application of the *definiendum*.

The construction of polythetic definitions raises several problems. To begin with, how many criteria does something need to match in order to qualify: just one, some, several, many, or most? While this uncertainty may be removed by meta-criteria explicitly made in the definition itself, such as in Southwold’s rather liberal “at least some” of a list of twelve quite distinct features (see appendix), any such demarcation would be arbitrary and artificial. Further, how long shall the set of criteria be and how does one generate the list? Is it practical to have a list of more than, say, ten or twenty criteria? More importantly: how does one get at the set of features? One strategy, akin to the method of extension (see section “To define or not to define”), is to select a so-called prototype, or several prototypes, which would generally be taken to exemplify the phenomenon in a paradigmatic manner; the criteria can then be derived from a morphological analysis of the prototype. Apples, for example, are prototypical fruits, dogs prototypical animals—and Christianity is often, in different parts of the world, considered a prototypical example for religion (a fact negatively noted by the ‘critical’ theorists). As such, a list could be prepared on the basis of an analysis of the basic formal structures of Christianity (or other candidates for prototypicality). This raises a series of problems. Is the process circular (Christianity is a religion because religion is defined on the basis of Christianity)? Who decides on the issue of prototypicality and on which ground? Can such a list of criteria be achieved at all, how, and who decides on it? Shall the list be fixed or flexible? If it is flexible, so as to include the results of further analysis and discussion, any definition becomes potentially revisable. Polythetic definitions are thereby far from unproblematic, at least from the standpoint of meaning realism (see section “Definitions and

semantic theory”), and do not promise to achieve unambiguous solutions. Some have even argued that polythetic definitions are antithetical to theorizing religion; philosopher Peter Byrne argues that “No theory of the religious is appropriate if the genus of the religious is simply a collection of things connected by overlapping analogies” (Byrne 1999, 384). Yet, polythetic definitions have the appeal of avoiding essentialism, which is regarded by most scholars of religion as a pitfall and a danger (even though most anti-essentialists have a hard time completely erasing essentialism from their own critique, leaving aside the fact that some have a narrow conception of essentialism). Yet, if polythetic definitions protect against essentialism, they do so in an uncertain and costly manner. As a matter of fact, many definitions proposed by contemporary scholars of religion are monothetic ones (see, for example, Frankenberry, Jensen, Lincoln, Schilbrack, in the appendix). The only definition in our sample that is explicitly constructed as a polythetic one comes from anthropologist Martin Southwold (1978).

Polythetic definitions are neutral to the question of meaning realism or antirealism. Meaning antirealists will regard the plethora of criteria as forever open-ended and endlessly revisable; for them, addition, deletion, or revision to the criteria need not be seen as changing the meaning of an expression like religion because there is simply no such thing as *the* meaning of anything. Moreover—on at least Davidson’s version of anti-realistic semantic holism—any two people who use the term religion, no matter how far apart in time, space, or social position, must as a semantic precondition, agree considerably, whether they realize it or not, on much of the definitional criteria. It is that commonality that, Davidson would say, allows them to be conversing about the same subject, although their understandings need not be anywhere near equivalent: even disagreement about X presupposes a good deal of agreement on it. These implicit commonalities are seen by this semantic approach as polythetically related: i.e. speaker A’s and B’s respective implicit definitional criteria for the term will overlap on some points, as will speaker B’s and C’s, but (i) A–B’s overlap needn’t be the same as B–C’s; and as long as A and C are far enough apart temporally, spatially, socially, institutionally, etc., their respective implicit definitional criteria may be considerably divergent. Meaning antirealist definitions, then, can be seen as an attempt to find words for capturing such commonalities, at least for those within particular placements or situational contexts.

### Homeostatic Property Cluster Definitions

A relatively new type of definition, which seems promising in avoiding some of the worries raised against polythetic definitions, has arisen in ethics and the philosophy of science but has not yet received attention in the study of religion\’s. American philosopher Richard Boyd developed the theory of homeostatic property clusters (HPC) in metaethics as a way of understanding how moral properties (good, right, just, etc.) may be natural ones and introduced an allied form of definition—the homeostatic cluster definition (Boyd 1988). He later extended HPC to the philosophy of science in making sense of natural kinds such as water or biological species (Boyd 1999), a move that

has received wide attention. In a nutshell, a homeostatic property cluster is a family of natural properties which are non-accidentally related—i.e. the presence of one of them increases the likelihood of the presence of others—in virtue of common underlying ‘mechanisms.’ In Boyd’s example, he argues that moral goodness is predicated of things which display a set of properties that are homeostatically clustered around an underlying mechanism of satisfying important human needs, including physical (e.g. health), psychological (e.g. the need to exercise control over one’s own life), and social (e.g. the need for love and friendship) ones. Moral goodness can be polythetically defined, he says, by this homeostatically unified cluster of properties. There is one other important element of this type of definition, at least as envisioned by Boyd: the individual properties of the cluster are allowed to be hierarchically ordered, in the sense that the presence of some might provide greater weight than others for applying the *definiendum*. It is even conceivable that, in certain cases, possession of one property might be deemed necessary (though not sufficient) for the application of the *definiendum*. A modified form of Lincoln’s definition of religion (see appendix), for example, might insist on the presence of a certain type of discourse as necessary for something to count as a religion, but that would not be enough for it to count; it must also display a certain type of practice, community, or institution, etc. Homeostatic-style definitions that are constructed in this manner insert quasi-monothetic elements into a polythetic framework; they are quasi-monothetic because there are no sets of properties which are both necessary and sufficient for the application of the *definiendum* in every case. On a final note, Boyd insists that there may be irresolvable uncertainty in some cases of whether the *definiendum* applies, but it is unclear whether this is because of uncertainty whether all of the properties in the cluster have been identified, whether the hierarchy has been correctly identified, how many of the properties of the cluster need to be realized, or because of a prior assumption of meaning antirealism. One advantage of homeostatic-style definitions is that particular examples can be empirically tested, at least to some degree; as the elements of the cluster must be non-accidentally related, it is predictable that the presence of one (or more) element will statistically increase the likelihood of the presence of others.

An outline of a possible homeostatic cluster definition of religion might go like this: religion is to be defined by reference to a homeostatic cluster of commonly mentioned features, e.g. actions, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, communities, discourses, emotions, experiences, institutions, narratives, representations, signs, etc. They are clustered, it might be argued, in the sense that the presence of one of these features makes the presence of others more likely; e.g. that a social formation defined as religion not only comprises actions, attitudes, etc., but that these are predicted to co-occur; for example, that there will be relevant types of behavior where one observes a requisite form of narrative. The proposed definition would then also express (i) a hierarchical ordering of at least some of these features, some of which may be necessary and (ii) underlying mechanisms which cluster them homeostatically (e.g. anthropomorphism [Guthrie], by-products of normal evolutionary cognitive development [Barrett/Boyer], the cognitive representation of actions [Lawson/McCauley],

exchange processes [Stark], ritual [Rappaport], interventionist practices [Riesebrodt], or communication [Luhmann]). One limitation to a homeostatic-style approach is that it calls for a robust theory of religion (see Stausberg/Engler, "Theories of Religion," this volume), and might not serve as a preliminary means of delineating the subject matter prior to theorizing. Whether this is a worry comes down to the relation between defining and theorizing religion: does defining precede theorizing or vice versa? From a practical point of view it is likely to be a two-way relationship: definitions are refined by theorizing, but theorizing is guided by definitional delineations. The sort of balancing we noted between the methods of extension and of intension earlier will likely resurface here.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of homeostatic-style definitions is their connection with an attempt to naturalize the thing defined: recall that, for Boyd, the defining clustered properties are natural ones. Some theorists, principally the 'critical' ones, might therefore balk at the very idea of a homeostatic-style definition of religion: religion, they often maintain, must be de-naturalized rather than re-naturalized. But, the question as to whether religion is a natural kind is a theoretical, not a definitional, problem. This question rests on the deeper theoretical question of what constitutes natural kinds. It is worth nothing that naturalism does not imply, as seems to be often assumed, staticity, non-contingency, timelessness, unconstructedness, ahistoricity, or immunity from critique or change. Moreover, despite Boyd's interest in using homeostatic-style definitions to advance forms of ontological realism (moral and scientific), there is nothing in such definitions themselves which prevents them being extended to socially constructed phenomena. 'Games'—as a general type including such specific instances as chess, baseball, or monopoly—is a paradigmatic example of a social construction, but a homeostatic-style definition does not seem impossible for them. Wittgenstein's famous injunction against defining 'game' (1972 [1953], §§65–67) is only an injunction against a real definition of it, and the general idea of family resemblances is blown out of all proportion to the argument that he actually gives for it. He mentions only three aspects around which people have tried to essentialize games—amusement, competition, and skill—and he points out, correctly enough, that not every game is amusing, or competitive, or requires skill. Yet, we recognize that the presence of these features increases the claim that a given instance will fall under the concept: i.e. an activity that was amusing and competitive would be more likely to be recognized as a game than one to which people were indifferent or which required no special abilities. Moreover, one that was amusing and required skill would be more likely than not to also be one that was competitive, suggesting a homeostatic relationship between these features are homeostatically clustered cannot be ruled out: e.g. it might be argued that those humans who go in for games have a tendency, whether as the result of evolution, enculturation, or special creation, to voluntarily set up unnecessary obstacles which they then seek to overcome (see Suits 1978). Despite Boyd's own intent to utilize homeostatic-style definitions to defend forms of realism, there is nothing in them that obviously forces that commitment.

## Value-Free and Universal Definitions

Religions are a matter of public dispute, and so is the very category and definition of religion (the word and the thing). Given its disputed character, we might conclude that “[a] value-free definition of ‘religion’ is thus impossible” (Devine 1986, 271). This, of course, does not logically imply that the expression cannot be defined in the first place. Another issue is that of historical change and diversity. Talal Asad is an influential voice in this regard: “My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993, 29). Remarkably, Asad seems simultaneously to deny the possibility of defining religion and to acknowledge that religions have “constitutive elements and relationships,” as if those could somehow be known in the absence of some sort of, even rudimentary, definition. Moreover, Asad’s argument rests on the important qualifier ‘universal’: it remains unclear whether he thinks that all definitions invoke timeless characteristics, or whether he thinks that non-universal definitions of religion would be possible. From the fact that particular religions are historically specific, it does not necessarily follow that they cannot share some common elements. His second point is similarly questionable: from the facts that all discourse is linguistic and that all actual languages are historically situated, it does not follow that a particular language cannot talk about things that transcend its historical location. Or perhaps Asad intends that universal definitions are impossible only when historically situated languages talk about historically situated things: i.e. perhaps universal definitions are possible for such natural entities as water, even though our speaking about water is itself part of a historically situated discursive process, but not for such things as religion? In sum, Asad’s influential statement is far from clear.

The Dutch scholar of religion Jan G. Platvoet provides a more coherent argument against a “universally valid definition of religion,” which he deems “most likely, unattainable” and “a recent Western idiosyncrasy” (1999a, 255, 251). Platvoet argues against such a ‘universal’ definition based upon several features of religion (1999a, 247–252): the diachronic and synchronic diversity of religions (polymorphism); their density and complexity (polyvalence); the variety of their meanings (polysemantics) and of their functions (polyfunctionality); the likelihood of extreme religious innovation in the future; and the Western origin and specificity of the concept of religion (on the latter problem see Casadio, “Historicizing and Translating Religion,” this volume). Platvoet, however, argues that there is a pressing need for definitions of religion in order “to clarify terms, concepts, and theories” (Platvoet 1999a, 254), and he stresses the potential heuristic, analytical, and explanatory uses of a definition of religion (255).

One problem with Asad’s and Platvoet’s arguments is that they seem to use ‘universal definitions’ as shorthands for ‘definition’ as such under the implicit presupposition of an equivalence model (see section “Meanings of definition: Theoretical points of departure”): it is the diversity, i.e. non-equivalence, of actual religions that they present as making a universal definition covering them all impossible. Yet, if we suppose that the points made by Asad and Platvoet are really central for religion, there is no reason not to

include them in a potential definition. People would probably not think that definitions of politics, or the state would necessarily be 'universal' (whatever is meant by this term) to qualify as a definition. That this should be the case with religion is an example of the *reverse sui generis* rhetoric (Stausberg 2010) among scholars of religion who construct religion in a manner one would hesitate to do for any other expression.

There appears to be no single understanding of the term 'universal definition.' Writers on it are seldom explicit. The following have all been suggested at least implicitly: a universal definition of religion is one (i) that is universally accepted (by all scholars) (Platvoet 1999a, 247); (ii) that defines a concept possessed by all humans and is represented in all languages (Platvoet 1999a, 250); (iii) whose *definiens* is permanent and unrevisable (Platvoet 1999a, 261; 1999b, 465); (iv) that describes the genus to which all particular religions as species fall under (Cox 1999, 267); (v) that groups specialized academic areas/approaches (e.g. medieval Islam, pre-contact Inca, snake-handling in modern Appalachia) into a single academic unit (Hanegraaff 1999, 337–338); (vi) whose *definiendum* names an eternal and unchanging thing (Belzen 1999, 96–97); (vii) that is atemporal by delineating everything that was, is, and will be a religion, including all of the unactualized but possible religions (Platvoet 1999a, 248); and (viii) that is uniquely true or valid (Belzen 1999, 96; Platvoet 1999b, 503). There is no single element that weaves through these myriad uses: e.g. universal acceptability as per (i) operates on a very different level from the others. On the other hand, (iv) and (vii), and to a lesser extent (v), invoke the common genus-species form of real definition noted above, with (vi) falling squarely within the real definitionist camp as well. The psychological and linguistic ubiquity mentioned in (ii), whether actual or not, suggests the objectivity of the thing defined (in either an objectual or lexical manner), and so appears to be in the same general real definitional neighborhood. Finally, the unrevisability aspect of (iii) and the uniqueness (determinate) aspects of (viii) cohere with a prior, though perhaps unrecognized, commitment to meaning realism and so are also closely aligned with real definitions. In short, the predominant conceptions of universally defining religion have them take the form of real definitions that lean heavily on a presupposition of meaning realism. To take the skepticism of the possibility of a universal definition of religion as a call to abandon the attempt to define it entirely—one of the predominant themes in Platvoet's "To Define or Not to Define" (1999a)—is to limit oneself to only a small segment of the definitional and semantic spaces available. Even granted such arguments against one limited approach to defining religion, there are other approaches available. Conversely, the increasing dissatisfaction with universal definitions may perhaps signal a growing, though largely unrecognized, dissatisfaction with meaning realism.

## AFTER ALL: WHY DEFINE?

Having gone through the roles, theoretical issues, and types of definitions, we conclude this chapter by considering the pragmatic functions and perils of defining religion.

One of the key practical payoffs of defining is to address or overcome ambiguities in communication. Appeals to define one's term typically arise when understanding is at risk, when misunderstandings are suspected. Definitions are also a powerful tool to enhance reflexivity: asking oneself what one means exactly by a word is always a useful exercise for achieving greater clarity (not necessarily about the object, but certainly about the nature of the respective inquiry and one's own horizon and perspective). On the other hand, definitions can also be used as a political instrument of control, coercion, and denial, a point noticed by Chidester (1996) in his study of the South African colonial frontiers. The one who defines is the one who decides what's in and what's out, who understands and who doesn't, and who speaks knowledgeably and who doesn't. This is especially true if one is committed to the admissibility of only real definitions: i.e. that once accepted, a definition expresses a fundamental truth. Definitions can substantiate real claims, and real definitions—insofar as people grant them reality—are particularly powerful in this respect.

Critics of certain studies—e.g. on religion and politics, or religion and science—may hold that the particular subject area was delimited wrongly to start with, so that the studies were misconceived right from the start. In fact, inter-, cross-, or transdisciplinary work brings to light that terms are often used in different fashions across the disciplines: disciplines such as economy, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, or theology often speak of religion in different manners than do scholars of religion's; these differences can be measured by eliciting definitions in order to make implicit understandings explicit. In a more technical sense, definitions are crucial in academic projects that seek to measure the effects of religion, or individual religiosity (religion as transmitted, learned, acquired, and developed), on other variables (attitudes, preferences, behavior, etc.). For example, empirical investigation of relations between religion and health, including the question whether religious people are healthier than non-religious people, requires an operationalization of 'religion' or 'religious.'

Definitions of religion are of importance also beyond the purely academic sphere, especially in the realm of law (see Schonthal, "Law," this volume), public administration, and taxation. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights entitles every human to the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (§18). This includes the "freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (§18). Religion is not defined in this Declaration, and it is not universally clear which entities would be protected by this stipulation. On a national scale, there is legislation pertaining to religion in different spheres of law. A prominent example is the United States. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution (adopted in 1791) declares: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof." While it is clear that this protection was initially offered to (Protestant) Christianity, this protection was not intended to be restricted to this religion alone: the principle author, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), remarked in his autobiography that it was "meant to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination" (Jefferson 2009 [1821],

37). Over the course of American history, an increasing and accelerating number of contenders for religion have arrived on the scene. In order to judge what deserves protection as religion and what does not requires a definition of religion (Greenawalt 1984; Feofanov 1994). Areas of litigation where recognition as religion is relevant in the United States include matters of tax exemption, schools and schooling, the military and conscientious objection, free speech, property, Sunday rules, land development, employment regulations, prison rules, medical procedures, adoption, and child custody (Greenawalt 2006). Other legal systems face similar challenges. The purpose for which definitions are required in this context is classificatory: does a particular group, institution, or phenomenon belong to the class of religion or not? Few definitions proposed by contemporary scholars of religion will help legislators to perform this taxonomic task. Yet, these definitions were not devised for that purpose in the first place and hence cannot be held accountable here.

As a final observation, and one seldom mentioned in similar discussions, definitions may delineate in more than one direction. Formally, definitions—insofar as they create boundaries between what is included and what is not—simultaneously create two classes: the A's and the non-A's. As a consequence, there can be no understanding of the A's without at least an implicit understanding of the non-A's and how they stand apart. A definition of religion, then, rests on some at least implicit understanding of non-religion (see also Lee, "Non-Religion," this volume, which describes phenomena for which the distinction from religion becomes a meaningful quality). In actual practice, 'non-religion' is conceived of in more specific terms: this distinction operates on two dimensions, both involving the question of the legitimate range of religion. Metaphorically speaking, in systemic terms, the first involves external (or horizontal) and the second internal (or vertical) boundaries; the former variety of 'non-religion' is delimited through (mutual) exclusion with 'non-religious,' the latter with 'wrong religion.' In the external/horizontal divide, 'secular' is the most frequent designator given to the non-religious other in the sense of 'no-religion'; it points to the limit of the legitimate expansion of religion (for instance with regard to the 'secular' state); it is the zone of no-go for religion. The internal/vertical divide has seen more variation with distinctions between religion and non-religion being drawn with regard to such things as 'idolatry,' 'magic,' 'superstition,' 'sects,' 'heresies,' 'cults,' etc. They are non-religion from the point of view of insider-discourses; they are the 'wrong religion' variety of non-religion. Both of the divides face theoretical and normative questions. Along the external/horizontal divide, 'secular religion' or 'religious secularity' is not obviously oxymoronical, though it should be if 'secular' designated the non-religious in a mutually exclusive way. Along this divide, people sometimes speak of implicit, pseudo-, or quasi-religions, suggesting that the external/horizontal delineation of religion from non-religion (e.g. sports, atheism, etc.) is not as sharp as should be required by a definitional delineation. Perhaps of more pressing concern, however, is that both distinctions/demarcations are fraught with value judgments and power structures. For instance, along the external/horizontal divide the secular has become a normative idea (Taylor 2007); or, as the basis of secularism, the category is treated as a historical set of practices that in some aspects overlaps

with the religious to science, while religious as irrationist movement. Some Iranian (Islamic) state, Along the intersection, as 'wrong from within the vertical axis co-alization of certain as outside of it: their not falling one counter-reaction

## SAMP

### Classical

- Kant (1960 [1793],  
 Tylor (1903 [1871],  
 Durkheim (1995 [1895])  
*rites relative to societies which unite into*  
 James (1958 [1902]:  
 in harmoniously  
 James (1958 [1902]:  
 take it, shall mean  
*so far as they approach divine."*  
 Tillich (1960, 6): "  
 which qualifies a  
 question of the nature  
 Geertz (1973 [1966])  
*powerful, pervasive  
 ceptions of a general  
 factuality that (5)*  
 Spiro (1966, 96): "as  
 postulated superlatively  
 Southwold (1978, 37  
 at least some of the

with the religious (Asad 2003). The ‘new atheists’—by defining religion in opposition to science, which they view as an inexorable force for secularization—denigrate the religious as irrational and portray religion as bad science. Conversely, many in the creationist movement, especially in the United States, use the label ‘secular’ as a pejorative. Some Iranian religious scholars who seek to liberate religion from the grip of the (Islamic) state, on the other hand, advocate ‘religious secularity’ (Ghobadzadeh 2015). Along the internal/vertical divide, Durkheim’s defining of magic in opposition to religion, as ‘wrong religion,’ reproduces within the realm of scholarship normative ideas from within the religious field. A choice of where to place the definitional divide on the vertical axis could all too easily contribute to the suppression, denigration, or marginalization of certain groups or phenomena. This is as much a danger inside the academy as outside of it: many phenomena have been ignored by scholars of religion as a result of their not falling within predominant definitions; the new field of Western Esotericism is one counter-reaction against such exclusionary practices.

## APPENDIX

### SAMPLE OF ACADEMIC DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

#### Classical

Kant (1960 [1793], 142): “Religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands.”

Tylor (1903 [1871], 424): “the belief in Spiritual Beings.”

Durkheim (1995 [1912], 44 [italics in original]): “*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred 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.*”

James (1958 [1902], 58): “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”

James (1958 [1902], 42 [italics in original]): “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”

Tillich (1960, 6): “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.”

Geertz (1973 [1966], 90 [italics in original]): “(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 mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*”

Spiro (1966, 96): “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman agents.”

Southwold (1978, 370–371): “Roughly, then, anything which we would call a religion must have at least some of the following attributes:

- (1) A central concern with godlike beings and men's relation with them.
- (2) A dichotomisation of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
- (3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence.
- (4) Ritual practices.
- (5) Beliefs that are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable . . .
- (6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
- (7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.
- (8) A mythology.
- (9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
- (10) A priesthood, or similar specialist religious elite.
- (11) Association with a moral community . . .
- (12) Association with an ethnic or similar group."

### Contemporary

Byrne (1999, 385): "[A] religion is any set of symbols (and associated actions, attitudes, feelings and experiences) providing human beings with a solution to evil by way of a theodicy . . . Religion is that propensity in human beings (however grounded) to respond to evil by seeking the kind of meaning (to engage in the kinds of actions, exhibit the kind of attitudes . . .) associated with the enterprise of theodicy."

Atran (2002, 264): "Religions are costly, hard-to-fake commitments to counterintuitive worlds. . . . There is no such entity as 'religion' . . ."

Lincoln (2003, 5–7 [italics in original]): A proper religion comprises four domains: "1. A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status. . . . 2. A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected. . . . 3. A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices. . . . 4. An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value."

Tweed (2006, 54 [italics in original]): "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human forces to make homes and cross boundaries."

Droogers (2009, 277): "Religion is the field of experiencing the sacred—a field in which both believers and scholars act, each category applying the human capacity for play, within the constraints of power mechanisms, to the articulation of basic human dichotomies, thus adding an extra dimension to their construction and view of reality."

Schilbrack (2013, 306): "normative practices that at least implicitly make ontological claims in terms of which the practical norms are authorized."

Schilbrack (2013, 313): "Forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical."

Jensen (2014, 8): "Semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits."

Frankenberry (2014, 195–196): "The short version is this: religion can be defined as a system of myth and ritual. The long version has three parts: (1) Religion is a communal system of propositional attitudes (i.e. beliefs, including hopes, fears, and desires) and practices that

are related to superhuman agents. (2) Myth is a story with a beginning, middle, and end, which was or is transmitted orally about the deeds of superhuman agents. The salience of 'oral transmission' places certain genres, such as novels and science fiction, out of bounds as myths. (3) Ritual is a system of communal action consisting of both verbal and nonverbal interactions with a superhuman agent or agents."

## GLOSSARY

- Definienda/definiens** the former is that which is defined; the latter is that which does the defining.
- Equivalence/elucidation** a basic divide in conceptions of definition: the former holds that definiens are merely stylistic variants of definienda; the latter holds that definiens advance our understanding of definienda.
- Meaning realism/antirealism** a basic divide in philosophical theories of meaning: the former holds that meaning (semantic content) is fully determinate in principle; the latter regards it as variable and fluid in both practice and principle.
- Monothetic/polythetic definition** a basic divide in types of definition: the former requires that all of the criteria mentioned in the definiens be satisfied by whatever to which the definiendum applies; the latter requires satisfaction of only some of the criteria.
- Objectual/lexical definitions** a basic divide in conceptions of definition: the former purport to define objects; the latter purport to define words.
- Real definition** a common type of definition which assumes that the thing defined has real or objective existence, often attempting to state the essential features of the thing.
- Substantive/functional definition** a basic divide in conceptions of definition: the former proceeds by mentioning properties of the thing defined; the latter proceeds by mentioning what the thing does.

## REFERENCES

- Arnal, William E. 2000. "Definition." In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. London and New York: Cassell, 21–34.
- Arnal, William E. and Russell T. McCutcheon. 2013. *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion."* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Atran, Scott. 2002. *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Beckford, James A. 2003. *Social Theory and Religion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belzen, Jacob A. 1999. "Paradoxes: An Essay on the Object of the Psychology of Religion." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 93–122.

- Bergunder, Michael. 2014. "What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26(3): 246–286. doi: 10.1163/15700682-12341320
- Boyd, R. N. 1988. "How to Be a Moral Realist." In *Essays on Moral Realism*, edited by G. Sayre-McCord. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 181–228.
- Boyd, R. N. 1999. "Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa." In *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by R. Wilson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 141–185.
- Bruce, Steve. 2011. "Defining Religion: A Practical Response." *International Review of Sociology* 21(1): 107–120. doi: 10.1080/03906701.2011.544190
- Burge, Tyler. 1993. "Concepts, Definitions, and Meanings." *Metaphilosophy* 24(4): 309–325. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9973.1993.tb00198.x
- Byrne, Peter. 1999. "The Definition of Religion: Squaring the Circle." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 379–396.
- Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
- Cox, James L. 1999. "Intuiting Religion: A Case for Preliminary Definitions." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 267–284.
- Devine, Philip E. 1986. "On the Definition of 'Religion.'" *Faith and Philosophy* 3(3): 270–284.
- Droogers, André. 2009. "Defining Religion: A Social Science Approach." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Peter B. Clarke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 263–279.
- Dubuisson, Daniel. 2003. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, translated by William Sayers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Feofanov, Dmitry N. 1994. "Defining Religion: An Immodest Proposal." *Hofstra Law Review* 23(2): 309–405.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 1997. "A Critique of 'Religion' as a Cross-Cultural Category." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 92(2): 91–110. doi: 10.1163/157006897X00070
- Flood, Gavin D. 2012. *The Importance of Religion: Meaning and Action in Our Strange World*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Frankenberry, Nancy. 2014. "The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 35(3): 195–210. doi: 10.5406/amerjtheophil.35.3.0195
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ghobadzadeh, Naser. 2015. *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greenawalt, Kent. 1984. "Religion as a Concept in Constitutional Law." *California Law Review* 72(5): 753–816. doi: 10.2307/3480329
- Greenawalt, Kent. 2006. *Religion and the Constitution: Free Exercise and Fairness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Greil, Arthur L. 2009. "Defining Religion." In *The World's Religions: Continuities and Transformations*, edited by Peter B. Clarke and Peter Beyer. London and New York: Routledge, 135–149.

Hanegraaf  
 Defining  
 Molend  
 James, W.  
 edition,  
 Jefferson,  
 (www.c  
 Jensen, Je  
 Kant, Imr  
 Greene  
 Lincoln,  
 Londo  
 McCutch  
 Oakvi  
 Needhar  
 10(3):  
 Otto, Ru  
 of the  
 New  
 Platvoe  
 In Tl  
 Platv  
 Platvoe  
 'Reli  
 by Ja  
 Pollack  
 Relij  
 Quine  
 MA  
 Rappa  
 Uni  
 Riesel  
 Loi  
 Saler,  
 an  
 Saler,  
 22:  
 Scha  
 Jo  
 Schil  
 de  
 Smit  
 ec  
 Sno  
 o  
 B

- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1999. "Defining Religion in Spite of History." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 337–378.
- James, William. 1958. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Signet. Original edition, 1902.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 2009. *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*. Digireads.com Publishing (www.digireads.com). Original edition, 1821.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding. 2014. *What is Religion?* Durham: Acumen Publishing.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper Torchbooks. Original edition, 1793.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 2003. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11*. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. 2007. *Studying Religion: An Introduction*. London and Oakville: Equinox.
- Needham, Rodney. 1975. "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences." *Man* 10(3): 349–369. doi: 10.2307/2799807
- Otto, Rudolf. 1923. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, translated by J. W. Harvey. London and New York: Oxford University Press. Original edition, 1917.
- Platvoet, Jan G. 1999a. "To Define or Not to Define: The Problem of the Definition of Religion." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 41–72.
- Platvoet, Jan G. 1999b. "Contexts, Concepts & Contests; Towards a Pragmatics of Defining 'Religion.'" In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 464–516.
- Pollack, Detlef. 1995. "Was ist Religion? Probleme der Definition." *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 3(2): 163–190.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1987. *Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2010. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Saler, Benson. 2000. *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. Original edition, 1993.
- Saler, Benson. 2008. "Conceptualizing Religion: Some Recent Reflections." *Religion* 38(3): 219–225. doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2008.03.008
- Schaffalitzky de Muckadell, Caroline. 2014. "On Essentialism and Real Definitions of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82(2): 495–520. doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lfu015
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2013. "What Isn't Religion?" *The Journal of Religion* 93(3): 291–318. doi: 10.1086/670276
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1998. "Religion, Religions, Religious." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 269–284.
- Snoek, Jan A. M. 1994. "Classification and Definition Theory: An Overview." In *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research [...]*, edited by Ugo Bianchi. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 741–754.