

Religion as a Common Sense Category

Within the academic study of religion, no one person has been able to create a satisfactory definition of the concept. Those from all disciplines have tried, proclaiming it as anything from a social phenomenon, to a base human desire for belongingness or the taboo, or as a divine invention of their God. This means that while they are perhaps useful additions to the conversation, they stray too far in the direction of pure materialism or exclusive theism that excludes all but the Judeo-Christian faiths that dominate the English-speaking section of the field. To solve this, an attempt must be made to remain objective in one's view regarding the validity of religious practice and belief, while also necessarily rejecting the idea of religion as being inexpressible or belonging to any single group. Thus, what I intend to offer is not a definition, but an explanation that treats the truth value of any one religion as irrelevant, views religions through their own unique cultural contexts, and advocates for a stricter application of the term *religion* itself.

Before offering a definition of the word "religion", it is customary to first discuss the difficulties that this task presents or whether it is even a worthy pursuit in the first place. Generally, definitions of religion fall into one of two categories, those being ascriptive or sui generis. The first is primarily adopted by those specializing in atheistic scientific disciplines that seek to define religion through macro explanations of people's actions. They suggest that religion is one part of society or human nature, a natural invention born out of people's fears or desires. The underlying assumption here is that religious beliefs are false inventions of the human mind that aid the individual in existing harmoniously with their environment in the face

of agitating forces, such as their own depraved instincts or desires for “belongingness”¹ The common criticism of these ideas is essentially that they are reductive, doubling down on their logical structures that are so broad as to try and deflect any criticism as having already been addressed if you simply accept their initial proposition. For example, if you disagree with Sigmund Freud’s lurid assumptions regarding the nature of humans and the desires for parental connection that stem from them, you can not possibly accept his theories regarding the origins of religion as a force standing in opposition to this nature.² This rigidity means that many theories fall apart before they even begin since there is no room for compromise and often seem like a cop-out designed to neatly boil down a complicated topic into a single source, claiming religion for their own brand of academia. At the same time, these theories ignore any input from the people participating in the religion, who would most certainly contest any definition that wished to reduce their intense personal experiences to simple psychoanalytical processes or obsession with symbols. Likewise, they may well claim that what they are doing does not fit any definition of religion, for religion as we think of it is a relatively new concept that is still foreign to many people, for who religion is what happens in the halls of a church or organized community, not when someone buries their dead in accordance with hereditary Daoist funeral rites.³ Though opposition by religious practitioners does not by itself mean that what they say is true, as self-report data is prone to its own issues, it would be an intellectual failure to discount them entirely, just as it would be in any other discipline. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the multi-

¹ For discussions of “belongingness” among humans and apes, see: Barbara J. King, *Evolving God: A Provocative View on the Origins of Religion*, 1st edition (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2007).

² Freud suggests “...these instinctual wishes [of humans] are those of incest, cannibalism and lust for killing.” in: Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Martino Fine Books, 2010).

³ Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Pantheon, 2017); Yao, Xinzong, and Yanxia Zhao. *Chinese Religion: A Contextual Approach*. 1st edition. London: Continuum, 2010.

faceted nature of religious belief and practice and remain ambivalent toward any theory that wishes to hamstring religion into belonging merely to the realm of sociology, psychology, or any other branch of the known sciences. When investigating the reasons for criminal activity, one does not simply stop at the suggestion that criminals are acting out their base human desires without also considering their social background, economic status, personal associations, and a myriad of other factors that go into explaining the causes for such behavior. One must also consider these things when speaking about religion.

In the essence of fairness, one must now speak of the failings of the sui generis model adhered to by theorists like Rudolph Otto. These are generally more applicable to religions falling outside of the Judeo-Christian category, but they are not without their own faults. Typically, that fault is using their knowledge of Christianity to create blanket claims about the religious experiences of other traditions. Other attempts at this sort of categorization have similarly failed, making use of unsatisfactory and historically bigoted criteria to come to their conclusions. For example, the use of the term “tribe” within the field of anthropology to describe “primitive” groups of people is not unlike Otto’s attempts to describe his idea of the numinous as most profoundly expressed through Christian texts in the latter half of his work *The Idea of the Holy*.⁴ Ascriptive theories are less prone to this problem, because their conclusions often dictate that all religions are equally untrue. Similarly, sui generis theories that lack the Christian bias start from the opposite claim, that while perhaps no specific religion is correct in implementation, the feeling of religious experience is wholly unique. This feeling is even perhaps the result of divine origin, but as in the case of the Otto’s numinous, can never be

⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

expressed using this-worldly means of communication. This feeling can only be truly understood by each individual through their own experience, which supersedes even those described by religious organizations, which are created by humans and thus just as limited in their ability to communicate the individual experience to their followers. The weight given to these individual experiences then becomes a form of truth, positively claiming the validity of religious belief and placing it outside the reach of traditional sciences. This, too, is a mistake and largely irrelevant to what I believe the goal of religious studies should be, which I will soon elaborate on. These conclusions, while I believe closer to the mark, bring with them further questions regarding the origin of these experiences. If they are divine, we once again fall into the problem of sectarianism that has run rampant through the discipline since its inclusion in academia. I would strongly hesitate to compare the experiences of a lay Christian receiving messages from God to a Buddhist monk's achievement of the jhāna's, or to a Native American's relationship with their totem, let alone argue their validity against one another. If the origins of these experiences are within the human realm, it stands to reason we should be able to explain them using ascriptive theories. Thus, the idea of an all-encompassing feeling of religiosity must be discarded, for the first is unacceptable due to the simple fact that religions do not exist in a vacuum, and most religious doctrines and practitioners have historically been against pluralistic explanations that profess ideas of a "oneness" that unites all religious belief. Finally, since we have already described some of the issues with ascriptive theories of religion, these alternatives are not comprehensive enough to proclaim their superiority over the sui generis model.

Since I have just concluded that neither the ascriptive nor the sui generis models of religion are adequate to describe the concept, it now falls onto me to offer my own definition of

religion. Instead, I will loosely follow the ideas of figures like Jonathan Z. Smith by suggesting that the term itself, which I have used numerous times in this paper, should be reserved strictly for linguistic convenience, without reference to the truth value of any specific religion or to an objective entity existing outside of conventional human conception. As I will explain further, it is the job of the philosopher to critically examine the truth value of religious doctrine, not the job of the researcher. In remaining objective on this matter, one must then necessarily combine and discard elements of both ascriptive and sui generis theories to explain each *specific* religion as a unique entity. To accomplish this, our methods of study must pay attention to the history, doctrines, lived practices, and cultural contexts of each religion, without undue comparison to others, and with the understanding that individuals act upon their own belief in the efficacy of religious practice, regardless of the opinion of the researcher. Thus, I will argue that the origin of religion is as irrelevant as the truth value, and that the question of origin can only be answered within the confines of each religion but has little to do with the study of individual or collective religious behavior.

Starting with the usage of the term religion, I will quote Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who writes in *The Meaning and End of Religion* "...men throughout history and throughout the world have been able to be religious without the assistance of a special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies."⁵ Smith dedicates much of this book to discussion of word *religion* and the historical usage of its Latin root. Similarly, I would like to bring attention to a fact also touched upon by Smith, that the term "religion" is an invention of Western culture. For example, the Mandarin Chinese word for religion is *zōngjiào*, literally meaning something closer

⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Fortress Press, 1991).

to *sect*. This word was created in the 20th century, adapted from a Japanese translation of the English word *religion*. Prior to this, there was no word that referred to the monolithic cross-cultural entity we refer to as religion in the Chinese language. Rather, *zōngjiào* referred to specific religions, primarily Buddhism in this case, but still lacked the correlation to a wider institution such as a Christian church, a Buddhist sangha or a numinous entity.⁶ Instead, it referred to individual action and piety, not unlike the Latin word *religio*. Again, quoting Smith, “To say that such-and-such a thing was *religio* for me meant that it was mightily incumbent upon me to do it. Oaths, family proprieties, cultic observances and the like were each *religio* to a man; or, showing the ambivalence, one could equally say that to break a solemn oath is *religio*, that is, is tabu— as we might say, is sacrilegious.”⁷ We can then see that historically, the word referred to outward expressions, acting as a verb where a person was being *religious* or an act was designated as such, not that they were participating in *religion* as we think of it today. This term held certain meanings personal to the speaker but lacked a clear definition. The change in definition came later, with the creation of the Christian church, and the shift towards *religion* as something separate from the individual and society.⁸ While the etymology is interesting, my point is that it is only relatively recently that ideas we now deem as religion came to be so. The evolution of the term *religio* and its effect on non-Western cultures is responsible for the issues we currently face in creating a satisfactory definition, perhaps meaning that it would be more beneficial to return to the earlier usage of the term, if not stop its usage completely. Instead, I would suggest that the word religion be used only in a few specific ways. The first is as a

⁶ For the etymology of the term “*zōngjiào*”, see: Yong Chen, *Confucianism as Religion: Controversies and Consequences* (BRILL, 2012).

⁷ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

⁸ Smith.

categorical designation in academic departments, to prevent the issue of having to create separate departments of Christianity, Buddhism, etc. Secondly, as a legal term, relating to the tax status of the larger institutions. Finally, as a common-sense term for the expedient delivery of information through a collective understanding of what constitutes a religion in the minds of the speaker and receiver. How one decides what does and does not fall into these categories can only be decided by the people in charge of them within various cultural contexts, for there will never be a consensus. For example, the controversial Scientology, which for some is a religion, and for others a harmful cult (in layman's terms). We thus relegate *religion*, as being a category created by humanity and thus subject to their whims, to the level of a convenient term that allows one to quickly and intuitively understand what one is referring to in a general sense, that encompasses but makes no specific references to any texts, doctrines, experiences, or other aspects of any one religion.

Since we have now dealt with the word *religion* itself, we must discuss how one is meant to study religions using this new culturally-sensitive framework created by stripping the word of its all-encompassing powers. The first thing we must do is return the idea of truth through definition that plagues both ascriptive and sui generis theories. As I said before, truth in religion is something to be sought out by the philosopher, not by the researcher. What I mean is that if one studies religion with the assumption that it is either true or false, they will tend to seek ideas that confirm this. Fundamentalists will point to their religious texts as proof of divine origin, while antitheists and skeptics will seek equally sophistic conclusions without input from their subjects. Neither of these are important, for while I will elsewhere argue strongly that religious thought should be categorized as a branch of philosophy, the secular discipline of religious

studies is not to be concerned with origins, but with how specific religions influence the world. To use the analogy of criminal behavior once more, a philosophical equivalent to our quandary is asking “What is [the nature of] crime?” This is a question that can only be answered by pooling together knowledge from all the known sciences and would be met with a similarly unsatisfactory conclusion that depends heavily on the place and time one is speaking of. Yet, rather than treating this sort of epistemological question as multi-disciplinary and philosophical in nature, religious studies treats it as a question requiring a concrete answer. Criminologists would not make this same mistake, for knowing the nature of crime, if it was even possible, does not help prevent it without further context provided by considering factors unique to individuals and the society in which the crimes take place. Following their example, scholars of religious studies should concern themselves, again, with how specific religions project themselves into the world and how the changes it causes affect everything else. More appropriately specific, and arguably useful questions would examine how Christianity affects racial tensions in the United States, the migration of Buddhism out of India and its effect on the region, and how adherence to Daoist principles affects the lives and behaviors of individuals. These are of course questions that have been explored in detail by scholars, but only when they remain undistracted by the irrelevant question of origin, the answers to which belong solely *within* the religious traditions themselves and the unique cultures they grew out of. The people in these cultures think and act in accordance with their interpretation of religious truth, and thus it would be a methodological failure to discount their motivations.

In conclusion, I have argued for a hard turn away from traditional approaches to defining religion, which are often reductive, colonialist, and fraught with bias from the outset. The history

of the category suggests that earlier societies had very different ideas regarding *religious* behavior and integration than do contemporary scholars. Because of this, I suggest the downgrading of the term into a simple, relatively powerless category used only for expedient exchange of information, but that is malleable and subject to cultural flows. I have also explained why I believe evaluating the truth and origin of religion is outside the realm of the discipline, instead belonging to philosophy and the study of each individual religious tradition through the lens of practitioners. Finally, I have done my best to advocate for a contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive method of viewing religions as unique, dissimilar ideas, allowing space for non-Western traditions that have been negligently excluded from academia since its inception. Following this should steer students and scholars toward more fruitful lines of inquiry that accurately examine how religious behavior and institutions can positively or negatively impact the world or provide personal fulfillment to the lives of those who study them, rather than remain tangled in the web of fruitless discussions of the academic meta.

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