INTRODUCTION

Readers interested in getting on with the business of describing the ins and outs of the world's religions will likely not be all that interested in this site. Instead, if you are interested in describing ancient Hindu myths, studying Buddhist rituals, and learning more about Jewish holidays then you're recommended to find a world religions web site, dictionary, or textbook—an easy search since both the web and the book market are flooded with them. Because you'll find what you're after in those resources, there's no need to offer yet another descriptive compilation of the whos, whens, where, and hows of those things we call religions.

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

For instance, consider a recent case that is well known to people in the region of the U.S. in which I live and work: several years ago the Chief Justice of the state of Alabama's Supreme Court—the highest judicial authority in the state—used private funds to have a two and a half ton granite monument depicting the Ten Commandments as an open book (also bearing inscribed quotations from other recognized influences on the U.S. legal system) built and then erected one night in the lobby of the state's Supreme Court Offices. Given the long, contested nature of Church/State issues in the U.S., his action, followed by his refusal to have the monument removed, resulted in a series of law suits, none of which Chief Justice Roy Moore won, despite his arguments that he was merely following the state's Constitution, which he, inasmuch as he holds the office he does, has sworn to uphold.* In the Spring of 2004 he was removed from his office for defying a court order, and, on August 23, 2003, the monument was removed from the lobby—and it then went on a national tour of the U.S.*

Question: is this a religious news story or a political one? Neither? A little bit of both? If so, which part of the story is which? If you were a newspaper editor the answer to this question of classification would have practical ramifications, determining on which page, and in which section, you would run the story. Would you feature it on the front page, amidst the day's most pressing political and economic news, or would you run it on the back pages, among the various ads for local religious services? Your decision could then influence how seriously people took the issue—after all, they likely won't know about it if you bury it on the back pages. And if no one knows about it, it might as well not even have taken place. Moreover, if you featured it prominently on page one, would it be there because this obviously religious news story had political implications (assuming, perhaps, that religion is a private matter that sometimes makes its way into the public sphere) or because the story was political through and through? Depending which of these options you selected, you will have likely taken a stand on a variety of fairly complex questions, such as: Is religion a unique domain, separate from culture? If so, does religion influence culture? Does culture influence—perhaps even cause—religion? Are they separate domains that ought never to interact? Just what is religion and gets to count as religious?

THE ESSENTIALS OF RELIGION

A notable early attempt to develop a more technical—rather than relying on a common or folk—definition of religion as a universal human feature, was that of the nineteenth-century anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) in his influential book, Primitive Culture (1871, 2 vols.; reprinted today as Religion in Primitive Culture). A "rudimentary definition of religion," he said, "seems best to fall back at once on this essential source ... belief in Spiritual Beings.* In this minimalist definition we see the still common emphasis on religion as an essentially private, intellectual activity (that is, religion equals believing in this or that) rather than an emphasis on, for example, the behavioral or the social components, as in Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) emphasis on public ritual and institution in his still influential sociological study, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912). As stated in Durkheim's often quoted definition: "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.... In showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing."* For Tylor, religion was an eminently private (intellectual) thing.

In Tylor's onetime popular definition we find the remnants of a philosophically idealist era in European history, when one's membership within certain groups was thought to be primarily dependent upon whether one believed in something (for example, the claims made in a creed or in a pledge of allegiance), rather than membership being the result of collective behaviors, such as a group of soldiers saluting a flag or people standing in unison to sing a national anthem (as argued in Durkheim's work). In fact, this presumption still persists today, insomuch as the institutions some scholars of religion refer to as "the cumulative tradition" are thought to be a somewhat deadened (that is, unreflective, automatic, etc.) behavioral expression of a prior, dynamic affectation often known as "faith" or "belief" (e.g., see Wilfred Cantwell Smith's classic 1962 work, *The Meaning and End of Religion*). We can easily find something like this distinction in popular culture today, in which people regularly distinguish between something they call spirituality and the institution of religion. "I'm not religious," they say, "I'm spiritual."—translation: I do not participate in unthinking ritual and pointless institution but, instead, participate in an inner, personal quest. That such people did not come up with this on their own, let alone originate the particular path on which they say they are traveling, indicates that they too are part of long established traditions and institutions with rituals of their own—such as saying "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual." It's just that they are participating in a different and more than likely competing tradition, requiring devices to distinguish and authorize it.

With its emphasis on the intellectual or cognitive component (along with such other early scholars as Herbert Spencer [1820-1903], F. Max Müller [1823-1900], and James G. Frazer [1854-1941], Tylor is numbered among a group today called the Intellectualists, a nineteenth-century anthropological tradition). Tylor's work offers an example of a classic definitional strategy: essentialism. Because the social movements classified as religions struck such observers as obviously having a number of different outward characteristics, many of which were explained away as mere historical accidents (i.e., the result of specific cultural or geographic context), they thought it unwise to define religion based on what they took to be its secondary, external aspects. Instead, like many others, Tylor reasoned that one ought to identify "the deeper motive which underlies them." Belief in spiritual beings, he concluded, was just such a deeper motive; in fact, he concluded that it was the 'essential source' for all religions. Accordingly, his naturalistic theory of religion sought to account for the universal belief in spiritual beings (a theory known as Animism). We therefore refer to Tylor's definition as essentialist (sometimes also termed substantivist or monothetic): it identifies the one essential feature (or substance) without which something would not be what it is.

In other words, if, as the German Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) once argued in his influential book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), that which sets religions apart is the participant's feeling of awe and fascination when in the presence of what Otto termed the mysterium tremendum (the compelling yet repelling mystery of it all), then without this sense of awe and fascination there is no religion. This feeling of utter awe (a complex combination of fear, trembling, fascination, and attraction) was, for Otto, the essence of religion—something that could only be apprehended fully by the participant (who had the emic perspective). For the late eighteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher the essence was "a feeling of absolute dependence"; for the early twentieth-century Dutch phenomenologist of religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw, it was "power"; for the early twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich it was "an ultimate concern"; for the late nineteenth-century psychologist of religion, William James, it was an experience peculiar to so-called "religious geniuses" that, once expressed, taught, reproduced, and, finally, institutionalized, was prone to deteriorate; and for the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, it was the experience of the Sacred—which he defined as "not the profane."

Although Tylor's classic definition differs significantly from all of these others (insomuch as his anthropological, or etc., perspective aimed first to document and then to explain the cause of such beliefs, whereas the others all presumed that the object of the belief existed independently of believers, thus prompting their responses), all of these scholars went about the task of definition in the same manner: the inductive method was used, whereby one compares a number of empirical examples, looking for their underlying similarity. We see here the common strategy of employing the comparative method to identify non-empirical commonality, such that certain types of all too obvious difference are understood to be nonessential features of contingent history—an approach characteristic of a number of scholars, from Frazer's multi-volume *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1st edition 1890) to Mircea Eliade's (1907-1986) classic work, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949). Today, this approach is most evident in the work of scholars of religion who attempt to identify the deep similarities among the world's religions—an effort that generally goes by the name of religious pluralism or inter-
religious dialogue (e.g., Martin Marty and Diana Eck). Thus, the study of religion, at least as carried out by some contemporary scholars, is an exercise in identifying what is asserted by some to be a deeply human, and thus humane, element—sometimes called the Human Spirit or Human Nature. Based on this presumably shared item, feeling, or value, mutual understanding across cultural and historical differences and divides is believed to be possible; after all, studying "their" sacred symbols, narrative, or practices inevitably strikes a chord with "us" (e.g., the cross-cultural comparative work of Wendy Doniger).

Much as with a light switch that can either be on or off—there's no such thing as a light being only partially on—essentialist definitions lead one to name something as religion if, and only if, it possesses a certain quality. That just what characterizes this essential quality differs (sometimes dramatically, as evidenced above) from one essentialist to another ought not to be overlooked.

A classic attempt to define something's essence can be found throughout the work of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato (427-347 BCE). Writing in a dialogue style—something akin to reading a play, in which different characters represent contrary viewpoints, all of which collectively explore a topic, such as "What is Justice?"—Plato's efforts seem to have been directed toward identifying that one quality without which something was not what you said it was. Of particular interest to us is Plato's already mentioned text, the Euthyphro.* This dialogue takes the form of a chance encounter between Plato's teacher—and the main character in his dialogues—Socrates (470-399 BCE), and a younger man, Euthyphro, both of whom are about the enter the Athenian law courts. Socrates is there to be prosecuted for being unholy or impious; the charge against him is that he corrupts the minds of the youth and invents new gods not condoned by the Athenian city-state (as this charge is laid out in the dialogue that usually follows the Euthyphro, entitled the Apology [Greek apologia, meaning to speak in defense of a position]). Euthyphro, we learn, is there to prosecute his own father for the murder of a farm laborer (or, to be frank, a slave) who was himself a murderer. Given that charging ones own father with a crime meant that one risked being judged impious—in fact, Socrates is quite startled to hear Euthyphro say he was charging his own father with a crime—Socrates proceeds on the assumption that Euthyphro must indeed know what marks the distinction between a truly pious and an impious act. Otherwise, why would Euthyphro risk angering the gods by performing an action that dishonors his own father (as if he, the son, knew what the father's actions ought to have been). Because of his own impending trial for being impious, Socrates could use information on what is and what is not pious (or, as we've already seen, what in ancient Greek was termed the quality of eusebia). The dialogue that follows constitutes Socrates's simple and seemingly naive—yet terribly persistent—effort to have Euthyphro arrive at a clear and defensible definition of piety. (Whether Socrates is read as a sincere or sarcastic dialogue partner is, of course, left up to each reader.)

But, before proceeding, it is worth repeating that what for us might be understood as "religion," a seemingly obvious concept most often distinguishable from such other social institutions as politics or economics, the ancient Greeks might have considered to be divisible into three rather distinct things: piety (eusebia), mystery (Greek myo, meaning to shut ones eyes out of fear or danger), and gnosis (Greek gnosis, meaning secret or esoteric knowledge). Whereas the first has already been discussed and will be elaborated below, the second refers to cults in which members were initiated into the mysterious workings of the cosmic order (implying the relations between mortals and immortals), and the third refers to a tradition in which ones personal salvation was thought to depend upon gaining special, spiritual knowledge (as opposed to intellectual or philosophical knowledge; gnosis is therefore to be distinguished from another Greek term, episteme, meaning rational knowledge, hence the modern field of epistemology). If one is interested in studying "ancient Greek religion"—especially when using "religion" in the fashion we've come to use it today—one must therefore collect together beliefs and behaviors from these three otherwise distinct aspects of ancient Greek society. Not that this is wrong, but it is hardly the way ancient Greeks might have understood the way their world was organized.*

As already noted, in Ancient Greek, the term eusebia, or in Latin pietas, signified reverence, honor, and esteem—notably as expressed in social and legal relationships. Examples would include the "proper" relations between husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave, soldiers and commanders, and as well, between mortals and the immortals. For example, a 'pious' Greek would engage in the proper rituals with regard to various gods but would also ensure that relations with superiors, peers, and inferiors were carried out according to the rules of propriety. In Plato's ancient Greek society, eusebia therefore signified the system of conventional and ordinary social practices concerning one's relations with others—relations that extend from the family to the gods, from social inferiors to superiors.

Because we are told that philosophy, for Socrates, was the effort to obtain self-knowledge in order to live the just and worthy life (as he is said to have remarked, "The unexamined life is not worth living"), then critical inquiry into ones actions and motivations was considered the basis for philosophical inquiry. Because ones actions are rarely, if ever, completely private, but instead are social in origin and implication, we can see not only the social role played by Socratic philosophical inquiry (e.g., the dialectical, or back-and-forth, question/answer
teaching method) but, more importantly for us, the intersection between philosophical inquiry and claims to piety. In other words, since piety necessitates knowing, and then acting on, the right social relations, philosophy (that is, public argumentation) can scrutinize those who claim to possess the quality of piety. Such scrutiny is a critical activity since it examines claims that present themselves as beyond examination (somewhat akin to the nonreligious study of religion, perhaps). For example, it can demonstrate that to boast to have knowledge of piety (as does Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue) is to lack self-knowledge; such a boast would then, ironically, constitute an act of impiety.

In the *Euthyphro* we have a number of such ironies that no doubt would have been immediately evident to the ancient Greek reader: we have a young man who boasts of having privileged knowledge of what is and what is not pious, and he is bold enough not only to charge his own father with a crime but also to set about instructing an older man renowned for his own skills at critical inquiry (both men are Euthyphro's social superior). And Socrates has been charged with being impious by yet another younger man. Issues that involve transgressing rank, honor, and privilege should immediately come to the reader's mind. What is therefore of interest is that a dialogue attempting to define the essence of eusebia is set within a context ripe with conflicts over rank and power. For the sake of justice, Euthyphro believes that he must prosecute his father—in spite of the fact that the man is his father—rather than exercise the "proper" and conventional relations (entailing respect and esteem for ones father). Socrates seems justified in inquiring if Euthyphro really is aware of just what constitutes piety. So Plato's character Socrates sets about practicing his dialectical method on Euthyphro, the very method of inquiry that has landed Socrates in a lawsuit of his own.

To Socrates's seemingly straightforward question, "Tell me, then, what is piety and what is impiety?", Euthyphro offers a variety of answers, each of which Socrates critiques on various grounds, until Euthyphro is led to repeating one of his previous yet inadequate definitions. The various definitions offered by Euthyphro are as follows:

1. Piety means prosecuting the unjust individual, impiety is not to prosecute
2. Piety is what is pleasing to the gods, impiety is displeasing to the gods
3. Piety is what all the gods love, impiety is what they all hate
4. Piety is service to the gods, impiety is no attention to the gods
5. Piety is to know that ones words and actions are acceptable to the gods
6. Piety is the science of asking of the gods and giving to them
7. Piety is the art of carrying on business between gods and human beings
8. Piety is that which is loved by the gods (see 3 above)

When people are asked to define something, they often start by providing an example of it. In the case of Euthyphro, to the question, "What is piety?", he answers that prosecuting criminals is pious (or "Doing what I am doing now," as phrased by Euthyphro in a line from the dialogue that is difficult to read as anything but pompous). But Socrates is unsatisfied, for this, he answers, is not a definition of piety. If you were asked to define, for instance, "tree," would it suffice for you to answer, "Yes, a maple is a tree, so is an oak, and an aspen, and a redwood, and also a willow?" There is a difference between offering a definition and providing an example, no? So it is reasonable that someone inquire about the criterion (or criteria, if more than one) that you employed to narrow down the many things of daily experience to just these five items. That criterion is part of your definition. Socrates is interested in that one thing that all pious actions share—their essence—for, if he can identify what it is about prosecuting criminals that makes it pious, then he can employ that criterion to classify other pious acts that share this trait—something that would be of tremendous use in his own defense.

For our purposes, the key to this dialogue is Socrates's seemingly simple question that follows Euthyphro's third attempt at a definition: 'Is something pious because the gods love it or do they love it because it is pious?' In other words, what makes mere stuff (like Mary Douglas's "matter" that can either be classified as "soil" or "dirt") into specific things to which we give names and values: is it our actions toward them (e.g., loving them, despising them, needing them, ignoring them, etc.) or do we, instead, passively recognize in them some inner quality, some essence. Case in point: is beauty "in the eye of the beholder" (meaning that beauty is a function of a person's taste or aesthetic sense) or does beauty reside deep within the object of art itself? As applied to "religion," is there some inner essence shared by all things that are religious or is "religion" a classification some of us give to certain human actions, a label we use for a purpose and these purposes change from person to person? Does religion have an essence—such as what Socrates was searching for—or is it a function of human behavior?

Knowing that by the end of Plato's text Euthyphro quite literally runs off (either in frustration or embarrassment), leaving Socrates's quest for the essence of eusebia unfinished, suggests that, despite Plato's preference for an essentialist definition, the search for an essence may be a hopeless affair. For, as already indicated, there may be as many essences as there are essentialists. So, perhaps it is to the function of religion that we should turn in seeking to define it in a manner that will be of use to scholars of religion interested in studying
religion as an item of human history and culture.

**THE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION**

With the essentialist approach in mind—an approach adopted by those who presume religions house a core experience or fundamental trait that sets them apart from all other aspects of human behavior—we can contrast it with the functionalist approach. Consider the thing that appears in many classrooms: a lectern behind which the professor stands while teaching. What is the difference between a lectern and a pulpit? Or, to put it another way, how do we know which name to give to which object? Is there some key feature that we can recognize to distinguish between the two? This does not seem likely, because the same physical object could easily be identified as both. So what makes a pulpit a pulpit, and not a lectern (not to mention a podium)?

For the functionalist scholar, there is no one essential feature that unites all things we call "lecterns" and thereby distinguishes them from those things known as "pulpits." Instead, the context into which something is found, the expectations placed upon it by its users, and, most importantly perhaps, the purpose it serves and the needs it fills are what cause things to be defined as this and not that. Functionalists, then, are people interested in asking what something does rather than what it is.

For early twentieth-century scholars, it was this shift from speculating on universal, non-empirical qualities and affectations to observing the role of local, historical context and empirical effects that signified the development of what they considered to be a truly scientific (i.e., historical, documentable) study of religion, in distinction from a well-meaning but, nonetheless, theologically-motivated study of religion's enduring value or groundless speculations on its pre-historic origins and evolutionary development. For example, consider that group of scholars already mentioned, a group which predated the rise of functionalism: the Intellectualists. This group of nineteenth-century anthropologists (or perhaps we should refer to them as the precursors to the field today known as anthropology) were very interested in origins—to explain something, they assumed, required one to account for its original state and its change over time.

Take Tylor’s theory of Animism, which we have already mentioned, but only briefly; to explain why people believe in spiritual beings Tylor performed what we might call a thought experiment. He asked his readers to imagine an evolutionarily early human being waking from a dream. Unlike modern people, who have a fairly complex understanding of the difference between being awake and asleep, this "savage philosopher," as Tylor termed him, was not aware of just what a dream was. However, much like us, he was profoundly interested in accounting for anomalies in his environment—it's just that he did not have the stock of scientific methods available as do you and I. Nonetheless, using rudimentary methods, Tylor concludes that the early human must have arrived at an explanation to account for the odd thing of "seeing" himself elsewhere or why he was able to "see" long dead ancestors (all of which was during his dream). Concluding that there must be something that outlives the body, that can depart and return to the body—call it a soul, if you will—struck Tylor as a pretty sensible way for such an early human being to account for such an odd experience.

Of course, few today would classify themselves as Intellectualists in quite this way, for there are a number of problems with this form of scholarship. To name but one, consider Tylor's conclusion: the "savage philosopher" explained his experience as the result of his having a soul. But is Tylor's theory of animism correct? To answer this question, we need to determine a set of criteria so that we can judge whether Tylor's theory of animism is persuasive or accurate. But short of inventing time travel, to allow us to be present when the early human awoke, so that we could observe him, we cannot really come up with a way to test Tylor's theory. In fact, some would question whether Tylor even had a theory, as opposed to a untestable speculation, premised on the assumption that early humans must have behaved in a childlike manner, solving problems as do contemporary children (after all, nineteenth-century scholars often referred to early humanity as "the childhood of the species").

To make a long story short, the problem with explaining contemporary events in terms of their origins is that the origin is long gone—cannot be retrieved. And remains only as a product of speculations that project contemporary assumptions backward in time. As such, one guess might be as good as another because the standard against which one measures the guesses—the actual origin—cannot be retrieved.

Given just how troublesome it is to try to explain current events in light of their origins—such as answering a question concerning why people throw spilt salt over their shoulders by saying, 'Well, a long time ago...'—one can see the appeal of shifting the ground considerably and, instead of speculating on an original essence, trying instead to account for the contemporary purpose something serves or the need it fulfills. In the early twentieth century, functionalists—who no doubt benefit greatly from earlier generations of scholars intent on explaining religion by means of appeals to its historical origins (such as David Hume's work)—made just this switch, seeing their
Intellectualist predecessors as doing something other than science. Their focus on the contemporary and the
observable made their theories testable, and, as they argued, thus truly scientific.

Today, functionalists who study religion owe much to such early writers as:
Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose materialist, political economy theorized religion as a social pacifier that both
deadened the oppressed people’s sense of pain and alienation while simultaneously preventing them from doing
something about their lot in life since ultimate responsibility was thought to reside with a being who existed
outside history and who would compensate for this-worldly suffering and exploitation in the life to come. Religion,
for a Marxist scholar, functions to reproduce the status quo by distracting attention from the actual source of
conflict.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), whose sociological study of religion has already been mentioned, understood
intertwined sets of beliefs and practices to enable individuals to form the idea of a common social identity; for
Durkheim, claims about religion were actually coded claims about the social group since the practices we call
religious are none other than members’ efforts to experience the group (for example, through performing common
rituals). Religion, for a social theorist in Durkheim’s tradition, functions to build and retain group identity.

Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) early psychological studies led him to liken public ritual to private obsessive
compulsive disorders, and to compare collective myths to the psychological role dreams play in helping an
individual to express symbolically anti-social anxieties in a manner that does not threaten their place within the
group. In light of his work, some today argue that religion functions to provide a venue for satisfying anti-social
urges, doing so in a tightly controlled setting, such as the ritual of sacrifice that we seem to find the world over—a
ritual that may very well prevent violence from spilling over into all of social life.

Current scholarship is pressing such classic work in entirely new directions, such as drawing on materialist
scholarship and semiotic theory to study the political function of myth (e.g., Bruce Lincoln); using a social theory to
account for such things as the beginnings of Christianity (e.g., Burton Mack and Bill Arnal); and drawing on
economic models of how shoppers choose among alternatives, to develop a rational choice theory of religion (e.g.,
Rodney Stark).

Of course, just as there are difficulties with the essentialist approach to definition (whether carried out from
a theological or an anthropological perspective), so too there are problems with functionalist approaches—despite
their current popularity. Among recent scholars of religion there may be no better example of a critic of
functionalism than Hans Penner. Penner represents a group of contemporary scholars interested not so much in
what religion, religious narratives, or religious rituals mean but, instead, with how anything comes to mean anything
at all. He is therefore not much interested in developing a theory of religion—as if religion was a sui generis thing
that required a specific theory of its own either to interpret its unique meaning or explain its peculiar function;
rather, he argues that scholars ought to turn their attention to developing a theory of meaning that can be applied
to, among other things, those institutions we classify as religion.

Despite the fact that functionalism has now become the dominant approach in the human sciences, Penner
nonetheless argues that it is deeply flawed, suffering from many of the same problems that plague essentialists.
What has made functionalism so appealing to the last few generations of scholars was their apparent consensus
that the source or the object of religious feeling defied explanation; because one could not get at the actual origin
or the actual sentiments that were assumed to be the source of religious behavior, then—or so functionalists have
argued—one has little choice but to shift ones focus and study the role played by the sentiments’ expressions or
what we might call their manifestations (that is, the behaviors, the narratives, the symbols, etc.). Moreover, the role
they play is assumed to meet some previously existing needs—whether those needs be sociological, psychological,
political, economic, biological, etc. According to Penner, this shift from essence to function, from source to
manifestation, is no shift at all and the much celebrated gains of functionalism—such as the presumption that
functionalists study something observable (that is, empirical), as opposed to the essentialist’s non-empirical,
subjective substance—are misleading or outright illusory.*

That scholars have been unable to settle on which of a phenomena’s many functions constitutes the
function is the first problem with functionalism. For there is no way to decide whether, to pick but two examples,
a psychological or a sociological function is more basic, for the advocates of each seem to argue that their
approaches are irreducible to those of their colleagues. Lacking a way of deciding, scholars seem to have settled
for what Penner characterizes as a compromise position: the needs are now often assumed to be psycho-social as
well as biological—hence, the interest, in the last generation or two, with representing the study of religion as a
cross-disciplinary exercise that defied the limits of any one academic discipline. Because—or so it is argued—the
expressions of the inner sentiment are many and the functions of these expressions are varied, a variety of tools are
required for their study (from anthropology to literary criticism), none of which are sufficient on their own.
Religion, it would seem, is a lot like love; to borrow the lyrics from the Oscar-winning theme song to the 1955
movie of the same title: it is a many-splendored thing. But, much as when, in the mid-1950s, China’s Chairman
Mao stated in a speech, "Let a thousand flowers bloom, a hundred schools of thought contend," only to end up enforcing (by, in his case, the use of mass violence) a rather strict party line in the following years, so too despite the variety promised by the cross-disciplinary approach to the study of religion's functions, a rather narrow party line ends up being reproduced.

So, despite either their apparently atheistic or agnostic viewpoints, functionalists nonetheless seem to presuppose a basic theological belief held by the people scholars of religion study: that there is a non-empirical source to the behaviors and institutions that scholars study and that, because their methods require their object of study to be observable, scholars must set aside questions concerning this source, presuming it actually to exist but either to resist or confound their tools. Much as the phenomenologist, in bracketing the truth of the objects they study and, instead, describing only how the believer talks about their truth, ironically authorizes the believer's assumptions by leaving them untouched (and thus protected), so too the functionalist, in setting aside the sentiment and studying only the function played by its varied manifestation, further legitimizes the believer's assumptions by leaving them untouched (and thus protected). It is as if the functionalist grants the believer the authority to set the terms in which they are to be understood, merely complementing their claims by adding some observations on innate needs fulfilled by the believer's sentiments—observations that somehow escaped believers themselves. If this is the case, then what we can end up with is a field in which we study the adjective "religious" but never the noun "religion"; that is to say, we are able to study its manifestations but when it comes to asking to what the possessive pronoun "its" refers (i.e., "its manifestations"), scholars must forever remain silent. We are therefore unable to answer a basic question that might have been posed by Plato's Socrates: what is it about religious beliefs, religious narratives, religious symbols, religious practices, and religious institutions that they can all possess the same adjective? Simply put, what is religion?

An example of this difficulty with functionalism can be found in the work of Sigmund Freud; in the opening to his now famous 1907 essay, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices" (which makes the case for understanding ritual and obsessive actions to perform the same function for neurotics) he had the following to say about definition: "In place of a definition we must for the present be content with a detailed description of these conditions, for it has not yet been possible to demonstrate the essential feature which probably lies at the root of the obsessional neurosis, though one seems to find indications of it at every turn in clinical manifestations of the disorder." On the one hand we seem to have this thing called "the disorder" while, on the other, its various manifestations. Freud, then, seems to presume that there is some essential reality beneath its empirical indicators, much as a traditional literary critic assumes that behind, or beneath, the words on the page one can discover both the meaning of a text and the intentions of an author—both of which are obviously nonempirical and, because of this, thought somehow to remain constant despite the sorts of historical changes and accidents that we all routinely recognize to happen to printed texts, the paper on which print appears, etc. How, one might wonder, is such a position any different from a scholar such as, say, Mircea Eliade, arguing that, because "the Sacred" manifests itself in symbolic form, its study is not exhausted by examining its merely secondary manifestations?

It could be argued that functionalists try to reduce religion to non-religious causes, thereby failing to appreciate the true meaning of religious belief. Of course, it is not difficult to find this critique offered by those who wish to study religion either theologically or humanistically. Despite this criticism, for yet others, functionalists represent a traditional viewpoint by studying material expressions and not their immaterial source, dressing their work up to look like something other than what it actually is.

Resemblances Among Religions

Readers might recall that, at the close of the discussion on essentialism, you were told that a light switch could either be on or off, and never partially on or partially off. So too with essentialist definitions. In fact, the presumption that there is a distinct insider perspective as opposed to an outsider view—as opposed to seeing insides and outsides as continually changing and continually contested, all depending on where you stand—is itself a product of an essentialist viewpoint. Although the light switch imagery works to communicate the "either/or" nature of this approach to definition (whether defining who gets to count as a "patriotic citizen" or a "faithful" Christian, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, etc.), surely someone must have thought, "What about a dimmer switch?" Good point. In the study of definitions the dimmer switch example would be called the family resemblance approach.

The family resemblance approach to definition—sometimes called polythetic definitions—is thought by some to enable them to steer a middle path between essentialist and functionalist approaches. Although useful contemporary examples of this approach would be the "dimension theory of religion" advanced by the phenomenologist of religion, Ninian Smart, or Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as "moods and motivations,"
this approach is credited to the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who, in trying to argue that there is no one defining characteristic that makes something "language," asked his readers to stop and consider how it is that they actually go about the activities of classifying, sorting, and distinguishing. If they did this, he suggested, if they actually considered what it was they did when they went about these activities, they would see that all members of a particular group more or less share a series of traits or characteristics of relevance to the classifier. To put it another way, all members of a common group overlap to varying degrees and in differing respects, just as no two members of a family are exactly alike (even identical twins); instead, they more or less share a delimited series of characteristics (such as name, hair color, temperament, height, favorite foods, blood type, etc.). Further, despite their best efforts to portray themselves as authoritative, no family member constitutes the definitive instance of the group—rather, all members share in the identity, to varying degrees. Group membership, Wittgenstein argued, is never a matter of yes or no (as in the essentialist approach) but always a matter of degree, a matter of "more or less."

To make his point, Wittgenstein uses the example of games, asking his readers to consider the variety of activities we commonly know by this name, challenging them to come up with the one essential trait that all of these activities share. "The result of this examination," he concludes, "is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc., overlap and criss-cross in the same way. And I shall say: 'games' form a family." The acts of classification and definition, for Wittgenstein, were therefore activities of selection, of choice, not of merely passively recognizing qualities thought to reside in some object that catches our attention (such as the essence of beauty, of justice, or of religion); instead, something was only "more or less" this or that (hence the usefulness of the image of the dimmer switch on the ceiling light). So, if only two traits are shared in common between two objects, say those two things we call an apple and an orange (they are both round and can be eaten), we have no choice but to make a judgement call regarding whether these two things are the same. But are only two traits sufficient? If not, then what about three? Or four? Case in point: is Buddhism a religion, despite the lack of any belief in a god in some of its forms? Or what do we make of some Evangelical Protestants who assert that Roman Catholics are not Christians? They seem to be saying that their Roman Catholic counterparts are not part of the family known as "Christian," likely due to the latter group being judged by the former as not sharing a sufficient number of traits.

If we follow Wittgenstein, then it seems to fall to those who develop and use classification systems—such as those who attempt to define religion—not only to have what a recent anthropologist, Benson Saler, has termed a "prototypical definition," but also to be prepared to make judgment calls when a cultural artifact meets so few of their prototype's characteristics that it is questionable whether the artifact can productively be called a religion. That the prototype we use when we set about defining religion in this manner is often confused with being the ideal case or the norm is certainly a trouble of which scholars ought to be aware if they wish to avoid making but one social movement the norm. It is just such a confusion between prototype and ideal that has sometimes led European and North American scholars to use certain types of Christianity as the authoritative standard by which they measure the quality and legitimacy of other social movements.*

Contrary to essentialist and the functionalist scholars passively recognizing either some core feature or purpose/need served by a religion, Wittgensteinian scholars of religion see themselves as actively constituting a cultural practice as religious insomuch as it does or does not match their prototype. Moreover, they are prepared to adjust their prototype for it is merely a tool and a starting place. That the family resemblance definition widens in the case of more liberal scholars (either politically or theologically), and narrows in the case of those who are more conservative, should not go unnoticed.

So what might a family resemblance definition of religion look like and do such definitions also have shortcomings? Consider the following two examples, the first from the philosopher, William Alston, and the second from the historian of religions, Bruce Lincoln:

Alston defines religion by means of what he characterizes as 'religion-making characteristics':
1. Belief in supernatural beings (gods).
2. A distinction between sacred and profane objects.
3. Ritual acts focused on sacred objects.
4. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods.
5. Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during the practice of ritual, and which are connected in idea with the gods.
6. Prayer and other forms of communication with gods.
7. A worldview or a general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual therein.
picture contains some specification of an overall purpose or point of the world and an indication of how the individual fits into it.

8. A more or less total organization of one’s life based on the worldview.

9. A social group bound together by the above.*

And Bruce Lincoln defines religion as follows: “A proper definition must therefore be polythetic and flexible, allowing for wide variations and attending, at a minimum, to these four domains”:

1. A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and thus 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, practice, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.

Although hardly the same—Alston emphasizes rather traditional aspects associated with religions whereas Lincoln focuses on religion’s role in establishing authority and order—both definitions provide a series of characteristics, or domains, that one would expect to find when one goes looking for a religion. It is held that the advantage of this way of defining is that it is thought to avoid reducing religion to some essential trait or function; for, as Lincoln—citing the work of Talal Asad—warns, “[a]ny definition that privileges one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious necessarily fails, for in so doing it normalizes some specific traditions (or tendencies therein), while simultaneously dismissing or stigmatizing others” (5).*

But, just as with the essentialist and the functionalist approaches, a few criticisms are possible here as well. First, family resemblance approaches often appear to be circular definitions (what we might call tautological or repetitive); religion, for Alston, is defined in light of such words as “sacred” and “profane”—words that are themselves generally defined in light of religion, suggesting that we already need to know something about religion in order to understand the very words used to define religion—hardly a helpful approach to defining something. For instance, Alston’s fifth point defines religions as having “characteristically religious feelings,” and Lincoln’s definition defines religions as being comprised of “religious discourses”—defining the noun “religion” by means of qualifiers that employ the adjective “religious” likely does not help us too much.

A second, related difficulty involves the role played by one’s prototype; when one reads a family resemblance definition, it often seems to be no more than a description of the thing one is defining—for example, it is not difficult to see Christianity lurking behind Alston’s definition. It is as if the scholar was looking at a religion, describing its main features, and then generalizing from these to establish a definition of what one would expect other religions to possess. As Benson Saler makes clear, we have no choice but to employ prototypes—after all, we never experience the concept of “table,” but, rather, we seem to experience actual tables, one or more of which we seem to use as the model for identifying those other things we classify as tables. But how did we know that the thing we had first encountered—that which became our prototype—was a religion? How, for instance, did Alston know that Christianity was a religion and that its features could also be found elsewhere? And what if something else had constituted his prototype? What then would his definition look like and how useful would it be to us in carrying out cross-cultural research?

This is the criticism developed in some detail by the British scholar of religion, Tim Fitzgerald*: despite the fact that the family resemblance approach is portrayed as more inclusive and therefore capable of recognizing the variety of actual religions, as with Penner’s critique of functionalism, there is an odd sense in which an essentialist definition yet remains at the very core of the family of traits by which other religions are identified. For Alston’s definition seems to be saying: Christianity is a religion; Christianity has these various components; therefore anything else that is a religion will also have some or all of these components. In the midst of all this, the essentially religious identity of the thing we call Christianity is simply assumed and thereby reinforced. Why it gets to count as a religion—rather than, say, a mass political movement—is never explored.

The problem is that, as already identified with the insider/outsider problem, such an approach merely takes what one group of participants already understand as a religion (what we might call their folk knowledge) and extends that (often in a rather vague manner) to other cases, as if generalization was all that was required to turn folk knowledge into a scholarly theory. In so doing, the scholar implicitly authorizes one among many (potentially competing) emic perspectives.
RELIGION AND CLASSIFICATION

Keeping in mind the relationship—suggested from the outset of this site by Mary Douglas's comments on "soil" and "dirt"—between classifier, the system of classification, and that which is being classified, we can see why a number of contemporary scholars have found the essentialist approach to be unproductive inasmuch as it presumes a common identity, or essence, to underlie a thing's many varied manifestations—the presumption that motivated an earlier scholarly movement known as the Phenomenology of Religion (e.g., see the Dutch scholar, Gerardus van der Leeuw's classic 1933 work, Religion in Essence and Manifestation). Classification is now seen by some to be an inherently and inescapably political activity. So, just as studies of the politics of scholarship have recently appeared throughout the human sciences, so too the study of religion is being re-conceived as a site constituted by choice and practical interests rather than one based on sympathetic spiritual insight (see, for instance, the work of William Arnal, Talal Asad, Bruce Lincoln, and Tomoko Masuzawa).

But as we have seen, functionalist and family resemblance approaches to defining religion can also be judged to be insufficient. Does that mean that, as so many scholars before us have concluded, religion cannot be defined—that, as someone like Rudolf Otto might have concluded, due to its complexity and subjectivity, it can only experienced and insufficiently expressed? If so, then how can one study it rather than just feel it? Is the academic study of religion even possible? Is the answer to the question posed by this site—"What is the Study of Religion?"—that the study of religion is an impossibility?

If identifying the shortcomings of various approaches to definition prompt readers to throw their hands up in frustration—as if they were awaiting the correct definition to be revealed to them—then they may have missed the point of Mary Douglas's work on classification. Take the cognitive scientist and linguist, George Lakoff, who is also well known for his work on classification. In a book entitled Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind, Lakoff cites the philosopher of science, Stephen Jay Gould's discussion of the difficulties in settling on how best to classify that animal commonly known as a "zebra." Biologists, we learn, generally classifying living things either cladistically (that is, cladists classify biological organisms in terms of their shared, and thus evolutionarily inherited traits) or phenetically (that is, pheneticists classify based on biological organisms in terms of their shared form, function, and role). Depending on which of these two different systems of classification the biologist uses, the three species of zebra end up being classified in rather different ways, with one of the three having more in common—as judged by the cladistic system—with horses than with the other two species of zebra.*

The moral of this story of classification? If we presume, as Lakoff suggests, that there is one and only one proper way to classify the items of the world (an assumption he thinks we commonly make, but which might be rather mistaken), then clearly, when it comes to classifying those black and white striped creatures found in Africa, and in zoos throughout the world, we've got a big problem on our hands. For we now need to come up with a way to judge which classification system is right. But to do that, we need to employ yet another classification system, with internal criteria of its own, to judge "correct" from "incorrect." If we understand language itself to be a classification system (i.e., What gets to count as a letter, a word, a sentence, a text? What gets to count as a correct meaning?), then we find ourselves stuck in the midst of classifications systems not of our making, without which we might not be able to form a thought, much less get on with living our lives, get from point A to B, let alone make sense of the worlds in which we find ourselves. Perhaps, Lakoff says, this folk view of classification—an approach that assumes that there is some right system, if we could only find it—is itself our problem. What if, as Mary Douglas's work suggests, all we have are classifiers inventing and using systems that assist them to achieve practical ends of importance to them—like shelving books in a manner that makes them easily retrievable or grouping people in a manner that enables the distribution (or withholding) of goods? What if classification systems are seen as human products, tools, that we make, use, fine tune, and, sometimes, discard. If that was the case, then would the difficulties of each approach to defining religion prompt us to give up the search for a definition altogether? Or, instead, would these difficulties each be seen merely as the flaws that all products inevitably have?

For those who think that religion names some essential thing existing out there in the world, or deep within the human heart—much like those who think that the things we call "zebras" have some essential trait that distinguishes them from the things we call "horses"—then the problem with the difficulties that we have identified with various attempts at definition is that none are perfect. But for those who see classification systems—such as religion/culture or sacred/profane—as artifacts from human social worlds, then these difficulties are not problems at all.

Due to the breadth of his own work and its international influence, Jonathan Z. Smith is, perhaps, the best known representative of a recent development among scholars of religion who take seriously that the category "religion"—both the word and the various concepts that are attached to it—is their tool and that it does not
necessarily identify a universal affectation lurking deep within human nature, and that there is therefore no one correct way to define it. Instead, "religion" is understood as a tool some people happen to use in making sense of the worlds in which they find themselves; its definition is therefore intimately linked to their interests—whether their interests are intellectual and theoretical or whether they are practical and political. In Smith's words, from the opening to his influential collection of essays, *Imagining Religion*: "While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, ... must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study."

Contrary to Max Weber (1864-1920), who famously opened his now classic *The Sociology of Religion* (1922) by stating that exhaustive description must come before any attempt to define religion—"Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end"—many scholars no longer see classification to be concerned with linking an historical and therefore material word to an ahistorical and purely ideal quality identified only after all empirical cases have been considered. Instead, classification—like all human activities—is now understood by many as a tactical, provisional activity, directed not by inductive observation followed by generalization but, instead, by deductive scholarly theories and prior social interests that are in need of disclosure and examination. In this way, classification ensures that some generic thing (such as what Mary Douglas termed "matter" [a word that seems to presuppose an atomic view of reality] or what we might more informally call "stuff") stands out as an object worthy of describing (such as either soil or dirt); come to think of it, without a prior definition of religion Weber would not have had anything to describe! To paraphrase Jonathan Z. Smith, classification therefore provides scholars with some elbow room to get on with their work of disciplined inquiry.

It is therefore fitting to end this brief introduction to the academic study of religion with the words of the scholar of Hinduism, Brian K. Smith, who offers a rather different view of definition from that of Weber—one nicely in line with that of J. Z. Smith: "To define," he writes, "is not to finish, but to start. To define is not to confine but to create something and ... eventually redefine. To define, finally, is not to destroy but to construct for the purpose of useful reflection.... In fact, we have definitions, hazy and inarticulate as they might be, for every object about which we know something.... Let us, then, define our concept of definition as a tentative classification of a phenomenon which allows us to begin an analysis of the phenomenon so defined." Classification systems, then, do not illuminate some deep, essential, or necessary trait—whether we are defining mountains, zebras, or religions; instead, they are tactical and provisional tools that provide us with a little wiggle room so that we can get on with the production of knowledge and action in the world. After all, as pointed out time and again by Jonathan Smith, knowledge is based upon classification systems; and, as he states in the conclusion to his 2000 essay entitled "Classification," "the rejection of classificatory interest is ... a rejection of thought."

**Conclusion**

So, to answer the question posed at the outset of this site—"What is the study of religion?"—we can now say that it is the disciplined inquiry of but one aspect of human cultural practices—an aspect identified, for the purposes of our study, by the definition we choose to use, a definition that suits our purposes and our curiosities. What unites us into this collective group—signified by the possessive pronoun "our"—is not only shared curiosities, common tools, and agreed upon standards of evidence and argumentation, but also the institutional setting that draws us together as a group, and to which our labors contribute. This setting is the public university, an institution that has profound bearing on what ends up counting as the academic studying of religion.

Perhaps, then, we should conclude by revising our original question, for "What is the study of religion?" might best be answered by first asking: "Where is the study of religion practiced, by whom, and for what purposes?" For, depending on context and interests, it can be very different things, to different people—much like Mary Douglas's 'matter' that can end up being either soil or dirt.

And so we return to the example cited at the start: the newspaper editor and the story about a monument to the Ten Commandments erected by the Chief Justice of the state of Alabama's Supreme Court. How shall we classify it? How shall we study it?

Answering such questions is the work of the scholar of religion.
CASE STUDY:  
"RELIGION" AND THE POLITICS OF CLASSIFICATION


Full references for each source quoted in this portion of the site can be found here.

As suggested earlier, in the discussion of essentialism, there may be something at stake in classifying those behaviors we call religious as being merely the outward manifestation of an otherwise unseen, and therefore only felt, inner sentiment. What is at stake is that the context, the historical specificity of the act, is either lost or overlooked, as if it was merely the stage on which some spiritual drama was taking place. Perhaps, or so the materialist would argue, the historical stage is not some neutral set or mere background, but is itself the drama. Perhaps, then, there is something political at stake in studying any human action as anything but just that—an all too human action, with conflicting motives and unanticipated implications.

Although I've offered one brief example of a newspaper editor trying to classify a story (thereby making an event an item of discourse), consider another, offered in rather more detail: the case of the interpretations American media and intellectuals gave to the much publicized actions of several Vietnamese Buddhists who, beginning in mid-June of 1963, died by publicly setting themselves on fire.*

The first of these deaths occurred at a busy downtown intersection in Saigon on June 11, 1963, and was widely reported in American newspapers the following day, although the New York Times, along with many other newspapers, declined to print Malcolm Browne's famous, or rather infamous, photograph (see below) of the lone monk burning (Moeller 1989: 404). The monk, seventy-three year old Thich Quang Duc, sat at a busy downtown intersection and had gasoline poured over him by two fellow monks. As a large crowd of Buddhists and reporters watched, he lit a match and, over the course of a few moments, burned to death while he remained seated in what is known as the lotus position (a seated position used while meditating). In the words of U.S. journalist David Halberstam, who was at that time filing daily reports on the war with the New York Times:

'I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think.... As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him' (Halberstam 1965: 211).

After his funeral, where his remains were finally reduced to ashes, Quang Duc's heart, which had not burned, was retrieved, enshrined, and treated as a sacred relic (Schecter 1967: 179).

In spite of the fact that this event took place during the same busy news week as the civil rights movement in the United States was reaching a peak (with the enrollment of the first two black students at the University of Alabama and in the same week as the murder, in Jackson, Mississippi, of the civil rights leader Medgar Evers), as the week progressed Quang Duc's death and the subsequent demonstrations associated with his funeral were
covered by the American media in greater detail. From the small initial article on page three of the New York Times on June 12 that reported the death accompanied only by a photograph of a nearby protest that prevented a fire truck from reaching the scene, the story was briefly summarized and updated on page five the next day and then was moved to the lead story on page one on June 14, 1963, accompanied by the following headline: 'US Warns South Vietnam On Demands of Buddhists: [South Vietnamese President] Diem is told he faces censure if he fails to satisfy religious grievances, many of which are called just.' The story, no longer simply involving the actions of a lone Buddhist monk but now concerned with the official US reaction, remained on page one for the following days, was reported in greater detail by Halberstam in the Sunday edition (June 16, 1963), and was mentioned for the first time in an editorial column on June 17, 1963, one week after it occurred. By the autumn of that year the images either of protesting or burning monks had appeared in a number of popular magazines, most notably in the onetime popular Life Magazine (in the June, August, September, and November issues).

Despite of the wide coverage these so-called 'religious grievances' and the death by fire received in newspapers and the popular presses, it seems puzzling that it received relatively little or no treatment by scholars of religion. Apart from a few brief descriptions of these events in an assortment of books on world religions in general (such as Ninian Smart's The World's Religions, where it is interpreted as an 'ethical' act [1989: 447]) or on Buddhism in South East Asia, only one detailed article was published at that time, in the well-known journal, History of Religions, written by Jan Yün-Hua (1965). This article was concerned with examining the medieval Chinese Buddhist precedents for Quang Duc's death, a death that quickly came to be interpreted in the media as an instance of self-immolation (from Latin, meaning to sprinkle, as in blessing a sacrificial victim) to protest persecution of the Buddhists in South Vietnam by the minority of politically and militarily powerful Vietnamese Roman Catholics. According to such accounts, the protest and, eventually, Quang Duc's death, was in response to a prior demonstration (on May 8, 1963) at which government troops aggressively broke up a Buddhist gathering in the old imperial city of Hue that was demonstrating for, among other things, the right to fly the Buddhist flag along with the national flag. The government, however, took no responsibility for the nine Buddhists who died in the ensuing violence at that time, blaming their deaths instead on Communists. Accordingly, outrage for what the Buddhists considered to be the unusually violent actions of the government troops at Hue was fueled over the following weeks, culminating, according to this interpretation, in Quang Duc's "sacrificial" death.

Given that the event was generally acknowledged by most interpreters to be a sacrifice which, much like the term "holocaust" (from Greek, meaning "burnt whole" implying a burnt sacrificial offering), is understood as an essentially religious issue, it is no surprise that the central concern of Jan was to determine how such actions could be considered authentically Buddhist, given the usually strict rules in Buddhism against killing in general, and suicide in particular. In his own words, these actions "posed a serious problem of academic interest, namely, what is the place of religious suicide in religious history and what is its justification?" (Jan 1965: 243). The reader is told that the monks' motivations were "spiritual" and that their self-inflicted deaths were "religious suicides" because "self-immolation signifies something deeper than merely the legal concept of suicide or the physical action of self-destruction" (243; italics added). Given that the event is self-evidently religious (an interpretation that is based on an assumption that is undefended), the question of greatest interest has little to do with the possible political origins or implications of the graphic event but rather, "whether such a violent action is justifiable according to religious doctrine" (243). It seems clear that for this historian of religions the action can only be properly understood—and eventually justified (though one wonders why scholars of religion are interested in justifying, or not, some action performed by the people they study)—once it is placed in the context of texts written by Chinese Buddhist specialists from the fifth-century C.E. onwards (e.g., the Biographies of Eminent Monks by Hui-chiao [497-554 CE] and the Sung Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monks by Tsan-ning [919-1001 CE]). Jan's concern, then, is to determine whether these actions were justifiably Buddhist based exclusively on elite devotee accounts (perhaps we could classify such work as theological), some of which were written over one thousand years before Quang Duc's death in South Vietnam.

After a survey of these ancient documents, the article concludes that these actions are indeed justifiable. Basing his argument on changing Chinese Buddhist interpretations of self-inflicted suffering and death, Jan finds a "more concrete emphasis upon the practical action needed to actualize the spiritual aim" (265)—presumably, the aim of selflessness. Accordingly, these actions are largely the result of elite devotees, inspired by scriptures and doctrine (255), used as a means to demonstrate great acts of selflessness, the paradigms of which are to be found in stories of the unbounded compassion and mercy of assorted bodhisattvas (a selfless enlightened being, or Buddha, in-the-making). The closest Jan comes to offering a political reading of any of these reported deaths is that the "politico-religious reasons" for some scriptural instances of self-immolation are "protest against the political oppression and persecution of their religion" (252).

In terms of defining religion as an essential or sui generis thing, removed from the world of history and politics, this article's analysis constitutes a fine example of how classification systems effectively manage and control
an event by placing it within a specific interpretive context. Relying exclusively on authoritative Chinese Buddhist texts and, through the use of these texts, interpreting such acts exclusively in terms of doctrines and beliefs (e.g., self-immolation, much like an extreme renunciant might abstain from food until dying, could be an example of disdain for the body in favor of the life of the mind and wisdom), rather than in terms of their current socio-political and historical context, the article allows its readers to understand these deaths as acts which refer only to a distinct set of beliefs that happen to be foreign to the non-Buddhist (such as, for example, a newspaper reader in Europe or the U.S. in June of 1963). And when politics is acknowledged to be a factor, it is portrayed as stifling a self-evidently pure realm of prior, interior religious motivation and action. In other words, in this representation, religion is opposed to, and thus the victim of, politics because the former is known to be pure. And precisely because the action and belief systems were foreign and exotic to the vast majority of American newspaper readers, these actions needed to be mediated by trained textual specialists who could utilize the authoritative texts of ancient, elite devotees to interpret such actions. The message of such an article, then, is that this act on the part of a lone monk can only be fully understood if it is placed within the context of ancient Buddhist documents and precedents rather than in the context of contemporary geo-political debates and conflicts. And further, the ancient occurrences of such deaths can themselves only be fully understood from the point of view of the intellectual devotees—that is, Buddhist historians who wrote on the topic. That the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia in the late 1950s and early 1960s—a time when French colonialism was giving way to U.S./Soviet skirmishes in the region—might assist in this interpretation is never entertained. It is but another instance of the general proscription against reductionism.

Such an idealist interpretation is also offered by several contributors to the field's primary reference resource: the Encyclopedia of Religion (first edition 1987; second edition 2005). Marilyn Harran, writing the article on suicide (Eliade 1987, vol. 14: 125-131), agrees with Jan's emphasis on the need to interpret such events in light of doctrine and in the light of spiritual elites. She writes that, although religiously motivated suicide (an ill-defined category that prejudices the act) "may be appropriate for the person who is an arhat [a Buddhist monk], one who has attained enlightenment, it is still very much the exception to the rule" (129). And Carl-Martin Edsman, writing the article on fire (Eliade 1987, vol. 5: 340-346), maintains that, although death by fire can be associated with "moral, devotional, or political reasons," it can also be "regarded as promoting rebirth into a higher existence as a bodhisattva, an incipient Buddha, or admittance to 'the paradise of the Buddha Amitabha' (344; nineteenth-century Chinese Amitabha statue, picture at left). In a fashion similar to the exclusive emphasis on the insider's perspective, and having isolated such acts within the purer realm of religious doctrine and belief (thereby protecting them from the messy world of politics), Edsman immediately goes on to assert that the "Buddhist suicides in Vietnam in the 1960s were enacted against a similar background; for this reason—unlike the suicides of their Western imitators—they do not constitute purely political protest actions" (344). The "similar background" of which he writes is the set of beliefs in a Pure Land (a place in which Amitabha Buddha's devotees may be reborn, in which there are no temptations for greed), compassion, selflessness, etc., all of which enables Edsman to isolate the Vietnamese deaths from issues of power and politics. Because similar deaths in the United States took place without the benefit of, for example, a cyclical worldview and notions of rebirth, etc., he is able to conclude that the US deaths by fire may have been political. For Edsman, the doctrinal system of Buddhism provides a useful mechanism for interpreting these acts as essentially ahistorical and religious.

However, it is just as conceivable that for other scholars, the death of Thich Quang Duc constitutes not simply 'spiritually inspired engagement' but is a graphic example of an overtly political act directed not simply against politically dominant Roman Catholics in his country but also directed at the American-sponsored government of the then President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem. This alternative classification framework, one that recognizes the power implicit in efforts to represent human actions, is best captured by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins when they write:

"Coming to political consciousness through the period of the Vietnam War, we were acutely aware of the power of photographic images to evoke both ethnocentric recoil and agonizing identification. Malcolm Browne's famous photo of a Buddhist monk's self-immolation in Saigon was profoundly disturbing to Western viewers, who could not fathom the communicative intent of such an act" (Lutz and Collins 1993: 4).

For instance, according to Paul Siegel, this event constituted an act of protest against the Vietnamese government "which was carrying on a war of which they [the Buddhists] were profoundly weary" (Siegel 1986: 162). The distance between these two readings—that the death was religiously-inspired, on the one hand, and that it was politically-inspired, on the other—is great indeed. On the one hand, one finds representations varying
from the Diem government's own press release that, according to the New York Times, maintained that the event was an example of "extremist and truth-concealing propaganda that sowed doubt about the goodwill of the Government" (June 12, 1963), to the Times' portrait of the protest as being against the specifically religious persecution of the Buddhists by the powerful Roman Catholics. On the other hand, however, one can question the relations between the presence of Christianity in South Vietnam and European political, cultural, military, and economic imperialism in the first place, as well as question the relations between Diem's government and his US economic and military backers. To concentrate only on the specifically religious nature and origins of this protest, then, serves either to ignore or, in the least, to minimalize a number of material and social factors evident from other points of view using other classification systems.

Concerning the links between the spread of Christianity and European imperialism in Southeast Asia, it should be clear that much is at stake depending on how one portrays the associations between European cultures, politics, religion, and their ever-increasing search for new trading markets. For example, one can obscure the issue by simply discussing an almost generic "encounter with the West," where 'the West' stands in place of essentially religious systems such as Judaism and Christianity (for an example, see Eller 1992). Or, one can place these belief and practice systems within their historical, social, and political contexts—a move which admittedly complicates but also improves one's analysis. For instance, in practice the presence of Christianity was often indistinguishable from European culture and trade. (Picture left, a Roman Catholic church in Saigon). This is a point made by the well-known writer, Thich Nhat Hanh, in his attempt to communicate the significance of Quang Duc's death for his American readers. Much of his small book, Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire (1967), is concerned with contextualizing this event by placing it not simply in a religious but also in its wider historical, social, and political framework. Accordingly, of great importance for him is not simply to identify elements of Buddhist doctrine for his reader (he is, after all, a monk), but to clarify early on that, since its first appearance in Vietnam in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, Roman Catholicism has always been "closely associated with white explorers, with merchants, and ruling classes"—specifically with the explorers, traders, and cultural and political elites of France between the years 1860-1945 (1967: 15). Whether intentional or not, the colonial exportation of Christianity throughout the world brought with it new people, new architecture, new languages, new legal and ethical systems, new styles of dress, new economic arrangements, new trading goods, etc., all based on the standards of large, powerful, and distant European countries. Because of these interrelated issues, it may well be inaccurate and misleading to understand Christian missionaries exclusively in terms of what may very well have been their good intentions in spreading the Word. Such missionaries could instead be understood as part of a complex and interrelated system or bloc of power relations all of which presupposed that the Other was in desperate need of European-styled education, economies, technologies, trade, wisdom, and, ultimately, salvation. To understand missionaries as somehow removed from this system of power would be to inscribe and protect them by means of the sui generis strategy. Without the benefit of such a protective strategy, however, it is easily understood how, at least in the case of Vietnam, the popular belief arose that Christianity was the religion of the so-called West and "was introduced by them to facilitate their conquest of Vietnam." As Thich Nhat goes on to conclude, this belief "is a political fact of the greatest importance, even though [it] may be based on suspicion alone" (Thich Nhat 1967: 20).

It is completely understandable, therefore, that Thich Nhat takes issue with circumscribing the provocative actions of such people as Quang Duc as essentially sacrificial, suicidal, and religious. In his words,

"I wouldn't want to describe these acts as suicide or even as sacrifice. Maybe they [that is, the actors themselves] didn't think of it as a sacrifice. Maybe they did. They may have thought of their act as a very natural thing to do, like breathing. The problem [however,] is to understand the situation and the context in which they acted" (Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh 1975: 61).

The context of which Thich Nhat writes is not simply the context of mythic self-immolation paradigms, derived from ancient texts, that have been so important to other scholars studying these actions, but as well, the context of Vietnamese meeting Euro-American history over the past several centuries. Emphasizing this context, Thich Nhat's remarks make it plain that inasmuch as sui generis religion plays a powerful role in de-historicizing and de-contextualizing human events, the very label by which we commonly distinguish just these deaths from countless others that took place during the Vietnam war—e.g., "religious suicide"—is itself implicated in the aestheticization and de-politicization of human actions. What is perhaps most astounding about Thich Nhat's comments is that despite the discourse on sui generis religion's tendency to limit scholarship to the terms set by religious insiders (recall Wilfred Cantwell Smith's methodological rule that no statement about a religion can be
judged correct unless the religious insider acknowledges it to be accurate), Thich Nhat—most obviously himself an insider to Vietnamese Buddhism—is the only scholar surveyed so far whose remarks take into account the utter complexity of human action as well as the many scales of analysis on which participants and non-participants describe, interpret, understand, and explain these actions.

That the death of Quang Duc had a powerful influence on the events of 1963 in South Vietnam is not in need of debate. It has been reported that Browne's photograph of Quang Duc burning, which ran in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on June 12, 1963, was on President Kennedy's desk the next morning (Moeller 1989: 355). And virtually all commentators acknowledge that the imminent fall of the Diem government was in many ways linked to the Buddhist protests and their popular support among the South Vietnamese. In the least, most commentators would agree that, despite their supposedly pristine religious motivation, the deaths had what might be termed unforeseen or indirect political implications. The question to be asked, however, is just what is at stake for excluding politics to the margins of these otherwise self-evidently religious events.

As should be evident, depending on how one classifies such events, one thing that is at stake is whether it could be construed as having possible causes or direct implications for US political and military involvement in what was then an escalating war or whether, as many commentators seem to assume, they were: (1) a localized Vietnamese issue, of (2) an essentially religious issue which (3), due in large part to the Diem government's mishandling of the protest and its unwillingness to reach a compromise with the Buddhists, only eventually grew from a local religious incident into an international political issue. The event is thereby domesticated and managed. For example, consider the children's literary critic Herbert Kohl who has convincingly demonstrated, in the case of the surprisingly homogenous and depoliticized school textbook representations of the events surrounding the 1955-1956 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, the story is truncated and presented completely out of context and portrayed:

"as the single act of a person who was tired and angry. Intelligent and passionate opposition to racism is simply not part of the story. [In fact, often] there is no mention of racism at all. Instead the problem is unfairness, a more generic and softer form of abuse that avoids dealing with the fact that the great majority of White people in Montgomery were racist and capable of being violent and cruel to maintain segregation. Thus [in the dominant textbook account of this event] we have an adequate picture of neither the courage of Rosa Parks nor the intelligence and resolve of the African American community in the face of racism" (Kohl 1995: 35).

The very act of representation, in both the cases of the Buddhist death and the bus boycott, defuses what might otherwise be understood as the tremendous sociopolitical power of the events in question. In the case of the self-immolations, the image of the monk burning has by now become so de-contextualized from a specific moment of contest that it has been, as Karl Marx might have phrased it, commodified, for it is now a consumer item in popular culture. For example, the photograph (below) appears on the cover of a 1992 compact disk for the alternative U.S. rock group, "Rage Against the Machine."

![Rage Against the Machine](https://example.com/rage-against-the-machine-cover.jpg)

Although both the example of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Vietnamese deaths arise from different historical and social contexts, both actions were clearly part of an oppositional discourse that is today communicated to us through, and therefore managed by, the means of dominant discourses—school textbooks, in one case, and as a device for selling a Sony Music product, in another. Therefore, it should not be surprising that in both cases we find strategies that effectively package these actions in a decontextualized and delimited fashion—making them a commodity to be exchanged. It is in this precise manner that the strategies of
representation constitutive of the discourse on sui generis religion are complicit with such larger issues of cultural, economic, and political power and privilege.

The deaths of the Buddhists could either be seen as a statement against American-backed imperialism and war or simply against the localized persecution of one religious group by another, all depending on ones classification of the act. If the former, then the repercussions of the event strike deeply not only in Vietnam of the early 1960s but in the United States of that era as well. If only the latter, then the problem is isolated, it remains in Saigon or in ancient Buddhist texts known only to the experts. Clearly, there were practical and political advantages and disadvantages depending on which of the two above intellectual interpretations is favored—depending, that is, on the interests of the classifier.

Given contemporary geo-politics, the issue of the category "religion" and the implications for how it is used when classifying and studying human motivations and behaviors, continues to have direct relevance. Case in point: scholars who study the motivations for what we now commonly call suicide bombings—much in the news lately in various parts of the world. Although there are many who understand such behaviors as religiously motivated and thus the acts of so-called fanatics or fundamentalists, there are also those who see classifying such acts in this way to obscure other factors—profoundly practical factors—that prompt people to use their own bodies as deadly weapons or, in the least, as sites of socio-politically significant statements. To explore this issue further, using contemporary data, consider listening to the two-part story on National Public Radio (Part 1 [5 minutes] and Part 2 [5 minutes]), first broadcast on June 27 and 28, 2005 (RealPlayer or Windows Media Player required).

References:

DEFINITIONS

The following is an alphabetical list of terms and concepts that are discussed on this site. The first time each of these terms appears on one of this site's main pages, there is a link to the following discussion. If you arrive at this page by following one of those links, then use the back button to return to the main text.

Links within the following entries refer either to other concepts already discussed on this page, to scholars discussed elsewhere on this site, or to outside resources (which open into new browser windows).

Although a number of resources have been used to create this page, readers interested in more detailed discussions of some of the following concepts should consult the two primary works used: Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion. HarperSanFrancisco, 1995 and Mircea Eliade (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Religion. Macmillan, 1986 [2nd. edition 2005].

Agent - term commonly used to refer to a being assumed to be intentional—that is, a being who acts, has motivations that inspires such actions, and can therefore be held accountable for these motives and actions. Human beings are therefore to possess the quality known as agency. The term is also sometimes used to describe non-intentional things, such as a "chemical agent," which nonetheless are thought to be able to cause certain outcomes.

Agnosticism - term coined in the nineteenth century by combining the Greek gnosia (meaning esoteric or secret forms of knowledge) with the prefix a- which often denotes the negative form of a word; a philosophical position that admits to having no privileged knowledge concerning whether God or the gods exist; a position of
theological neutrality to be distinguished from atheism.

**Ani** - [Latin anima, meaning life, soul] a term popularized by the late nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor to name the belief he thought to be held by evolutionarily early people (what Tylor would have named as "primitive" or "tribes very low in the scale of humanity") concerning natural phenomena (e.g., trees, the ocean, people, etc.) possessing spirits or souls. This term, and his theory of animism, was developed to help answer the question: "What is the origin of religion?" making Tylor an early example of a scholar developing a naturalistic theory of religion.

**Anthropology** - [Greek anthropos, meaning human being + Greek logos, meaning the systematic study of] the modern, comparative and cross-cultural science that deals with the origins, physical and cultural development, biological characteristics, and social customs and beliefs of humankind. Practiced as a component of the human sciences, the academic study of religion is considered distinct from the discipline known as anthropology though religious studies could be said to be anthropological in its outlook (or what is sometimes termed 'anthropocentric': centered on the study of human behavior); that is, when practiced as something other than theology, the study of religion is focused on human beings and their practices and does not study the gods and their will.

**Anthropomorphism** - [Greek anthropos, meaning human being + Greek morphé, meaning shape or form] as in personification, to ascribe a human form or human qualities and traits to non-human things; prosopopoeia [from the Greek, prosopopoia, to make a mask or face] is a related term, naming the poetic technique of having a dead or imaginary person speak, as well as the technique of giving human qualities to inanimate objects such as mountains or the sea. "The sea was angry" could be considered an anthropomorphic claim; seeing faces in the moon, or faces in the patterns found in wood grains, could also be considered evidence of anthropomorphism.

Central to David Hume's early theory of religion, a modern theory of anthropomorphism is that of the anthropologist and cognitivist, Stewart Guthrie, who argues in his book, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (1993), that humans—among many other species—possess brains that are "hard wired" to project onto the world the traits that they perceive themselves to possess, all in an effort to make sense of, and thereby navigate, an otherwise unknown environment. For Guthrie, much as with Hume, religion—that is, the widespread belief that the universe is alive and cares for human beings—is but one instance of this anthropomorphic strategy.

**Atheism** - a term that combines a human form or human qualities and traits to non-human things; prosopopoeia [from the Greek, prosopopoia, to make a mask or face] is a related term, naming the poetic technique of having a dead or imaginary person speak, as well as the technique of giving human qualities to inanimate objects such as mountains or the sea. "The sea was angry" could be considered an anthropomorphic claim; seeing faces in the moon, or faces in the patterns found in wood grains, could also be considered evidence of anthropomorphism.

B.C.E/C.E. - Unlike the explicitly Christian classification system known to most people in North America and Europe and which is based on the Gregorian calendar—with B.C., standing for "Before Christ," in the English version of the older A.C.N., which is Latin for Anti Christi Natus (meaning "before the birth of Christ") and A.D., standing for the Latin phrase Anno Domini ("year of Lord," short for Anni Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, meaning "In the year of our Lord Jesus Christ")—B.C.E. and C.E. use precisely the same numbers but stand for "Before the Common Era" and "Common Era." Scholars often adopt this alternative notation to avoid the explicitly theological assumptions of the so-called Western dating system.

**Buddhism** - the name given to a collection of beliefs, practices, and institutions that developed from (sometimes said to be in reaction to) Hindu/Indian institutions and that revolve around the importance placed upon the teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, thought to have lived and taught in northwestern India between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Gautama is known by the honorary title of "the Buddha" (which, in the language of Pali, means "awakened one"). The Buddha is thought to have awoken to the true nature of reality, thereby experiencing nirvana (to extinguish ones presumption of having a distinct, enduring self). His teachings involve understanding that all appearances are misleading and that impermanence, or change, is the basis of all reality. Several dominant branches of Buddhism exist today and it has distinctive shape in different geographic locations (such as in southeast Asia as opposed to Tibet, China, Japan, Europe, and North America). Studies of Buddhism will often begin by narrating the life of Gautama (given that it illustrates certain key ideas that come to symbolize basic Buddhist doctrines), and then focus on its critique of Hinduisms caste system as well as the doctrines known as the Four Noble Truths (credited to Gautama's first teaching after attaining enlightenment) and the Noble Eightfold Path (entailing a systematic behavioral system of detachment or mindfulness). Although "Buddhism" is an outsider's term (coined under the earlier European presumption that this Asian mass movement is centered on the worship of the Buddha just as Christianity is centered on the worship of the Christ), a more apt term for this tradition may be "the Middle Path" (between the two extremes of craving and complete renunciation).

**Christianity** - the name given to a collection of beliefs, practices, and institutions that developed from out of the ancient Jewish, as well as the Greco-Roman, world of antiquity. Focused on the life and teachings of a turn-of-the-era Jew named Jesus of Nazareth, it began as an oppositional movement that was persecuted and, by the early fourth century CE, it had become tolerated throughout the Roman empire. Its teachings, found in its scripture called the Bible (from the Greek for paper, scroll, or book), include much of the previously existing Jewish
scripture, including the Torah, along with the New Testament comprising the Gospels (from the Greek for "good news"), which present various narrations of the life and significance of Jesus (including his resurrection from the dead after being executed by the Roman authorities), along with the Epistles (Latin epistola, meaning letter), comprising communications between early Christian leaders (such as the influential early convert to Christianity and missionary, Paul) and various isolated early Christian communities or house churches. Jesus, considered early on to be the messiah ("annointed one of the Lord," a Hebrew designation originally of relevance to Jewish tradition) was soon understood by his followers to have been "the son of God," and later in Christian doctrine is understood to have been one of three aspects of God (the others including God the Father and the Holy Spirit). The honorary title of "Christ" (from khristos) derives from the Greek translation of the Hebrew mashiah; Christians are therefore followers of the one believed to be the Messiah. Currently, Christianity involves three major sub-types, some of which differ significantly from the others on issues of doctrine and ritual: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism (which contains a large number of sub-types), and Greek Orthodoxy.

Church/State - a dichotomy, that dates to sixteenth-century Europe, commonly used today in the United States to stand for the legally mandated separation between the workings of any Church or religious group and the state or federal government; this notion of separation is traced to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Commonly, U.S. political theorists and legal scholars refer to the "wall of separation" between Church and State, although this widely used phrasing is not in the Constitution. Instead, it derives from phrasing found in a letter written by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) while he served as the third President of the United States (1801-1809). More on this letter can be learned at the U.S. Library of Congress website.

Cognitive Science - [cognitive: Latin cognition, meaning a getting to know, acquaintance, notion, knowledge; science: Latin scientia, meaning knowledge] the systematic study of the precise nature of different mental tasks and forms of cognition, and the operations of the mind/brain; this study uses elements of psychology, computer science, philosophy, and linguistics and, in recent years, has proved one of the more active and organized sub-specialties in the academic study of religion, focusing specifically on the study of ritual. Unlike some popular forays into the interface between religion and cognitive studies, such scholarly work seeks not to isolate the part of the brain that experience God or the sacred (such as the so-called "god gene"); instead, they apply findings from cognitive psychology to develop a naturalistic theory of religious beliefs and behaviors. To learn more about one cognitive science effort to study religion, visit the Institute of Cognition and Culture. See also psychology.

Colonialism - [Latin colonia, meaning tiller, farmer, cultivator, planter, settler in a new country. Latin colonia had the senses of 'farm,' 'landed estate,' or 'settlement' and was especially the proper term for a public settlement of Roman citizens in a hostile or newly conquered country] the economic or political control or governing influence of one nation over another (a dependent country, territory, or people); also, the extension of a nation's sovereignty over another outside of its boundaries to facilitate economic domination over the latter's resources and labor usually to the benefit of the controlling country. Although not limited to European nations, their rapid colonial expansion across the globe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries today attracts a great deal of attention among scholars and has led to the development of a new field known as postcolonial studies (which focuses on the implications of, and local reactions to, the colonial era).

Comparative Religion - [comparative: form of the Latin verb compare-re which literally meant to pair together, couple, match, bring together; religion: possibly from Latin religere, meaning to bind tightly together] a systematic study of the commonalities and differences among the religions of the world; this study seeks to establish a set of principles and categories that can be used systematically to understand the universal and particular features of religions (in the plural) and to determine whether they are sub-types of religion (in the singular). Although today the notion of comparative religion is sometimes limited to the work carried out in a world religions course and textbooks, during the field's formative period in late nineteenth-century, Comparative Religion was the name often given to the entire field.

Confucianism - Name given by European scholars to a group of Chinese schools of thought associated with the teachings of such writers as Confucius (551-479 BCE), Mencius (372-289 BCE), and Hsun-tzu (298-238 BCE). These traditions focus upon developing proper forms of social and political behavior. During the Chinese Han dynasty (206-220 CE), these schools became official state orthodoxy, and a authoritative collection of texts and temples were established; see li.

Correspondence Theory - a common approach to understanding how truth and meaning-making works, and thus how definition works; the truth of some claim (or, what we might better call a proposition, such as "The sky is blue") is thought to be determined by whether or not the claim fits, or corresponds, to some observable set of facts. The truth of language (for example, the words strung together in a sentence) is therefore thought to have a direct relationship with an observable, stable reality and the judgment "true" is therefore a confirmation of this relationship. This correspondence theory (also called a referential theory insomuch as words are thought to refer to
judging the proposition "The sky is blue" to be true and the word "blue" to be meaningful; see positivism.

failed to follow the required prescriptions. If this etymology is persuasive, then the link from the earlier notion of debts; the act of guiding someone in a prescribed direction to carry out required action; the act of judging in turn led to such other meanings and usages as: the idea of following an established series of customs for settling debts; the act of guiding someone in a prescribed direction to carry out required action; the act of judging in turn led to such other meanings and usages as: the idea of following an established series of customs for settling debts; the act of guiding someone in a prescribed direction to carry out required action; the act of judging

mortal). The role of inductive reasoning to establish the major premise of a syllogism ensures that deduction and induction are intimately connected forms of reasoning.

definition of following prescribed action, see eusebia

din - Arabic term (pronounced 'deen') found in Islam that is translated into English usually as "religion." It is thought that the term dates to a much earlier idea of an actual debt that must be settled on a specific date, which in turn led to such other meanings and usages as: the idea of following an established series of customs for settling debts; the act of guiding someone in a prescribed direction to carry out required action; the act of judging whether such a prescription has been followed properly; and, finally, visiting retribution upon one who has failed to follow the required prescriptions. If this etymology is persuasive, then the link from the earlier notion of an actual debt to the later notion of the manner in which Allah judges human beings can be understood as a rather sensitive development of the concept. With regard to din's denotation of following prescribed action, see eusebia and pietas.

discourse - [Latin discurreere, meaning to run to and fro; in Old French the word had the more literal sense of traversing and the modern usage of the English word probably derives from the French discourir, meaning to discourse or] most simply, the communication of thought by words/conversation; a discourse could therefore be likened to a conversation or, more technically, to a teaching or a systematic exploration of a topic; many scholars now use the term to refer to any number of fields or disciplines, the formal discussion of a subject in speech or writing, or even the series of material conditions, practices, assumptions, institutions, architecture, and conventions that make specific types of thought and action possible (such as the discourse of the academy).

emic and etic perspectives - These terms are derived from the suffixes of the words "phonemic" and "phonetic"; the former refers to any unit of sound significant to the users of a particular language (each such unit of sound is known by scholar of linguistics as a phoneme) and the latter refers to the system of cross-culturally useful notations that represent each of these vocal sounds (as in the phonetic alphabet found in the front of most
Adopted by anthropologists, and later by scholars of religion, the terms emic and etic come to stand for the various social expectations and duties required based upon such factors as one's social rank, gender, birth order, modern sense of "religion," insomuch as the quality of generation, occupation, etc. Often translated as "piety" (from the Latin pietas), it is not to be confused with the gods (such as performing a ritual in the prescribed manner at the appropriate time and place) but also from those secular outlook, but others argue that there is ambiguity in the clause itself concerning its use and implementation.

Establishment Clause - a clause contained in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that prohibits Congress from "respecting an establishment of religion." Many believe this clause to mean that Congress is not allowed to create a national religion, give preference to one religion over another, or prefer a religious over a secular outlook, but others argue that there is ambiguity in the clause itself concerning its use and implementation.

Eusebia - ancient Greek term for the quality one was thought to possess if one properly negotiated the various social expectations and duties required based upon such factors as one's social rank, gender, birth order, generation, occupation, etc. Often translated as "piety" (from the Latin pietas), it is not to be confused with the modern sense of "religion," insomuch as the quality of eusebia resulted from ones proper behaviors toward the gods (such as performing a ritual in the prescribed manner at the appropriate time and place) but also from those behaviors involving one's social superiors, equals, and inferiors. Therefore, piety in the Greco-Roman world, was a fundamentally social, and not a faith, designation. See also din.

Evolution - [Latin evolutio, meaning the unrolling or opening of something] theory developed in the nineteenth century by such scholars as Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin to explain biological change in the gene pool of a population from generation to generation by such processes as random mutation, natural selection, and genetic drift. The much criticized theory known as Social Darwinism names a school of thought that applied this biological theory to account for cultural changes over time and place (assuming a uniform, linear development from so-called lower or primitive cultures to so-called higher or civilized cultures). Today teaching evolutionary biological theory in public schools is controversial in some areas of the U.S. due to the manner in which it is understood by some Christians to contradict a literal reading of the creation of the world as found in the Bible's book of Genesis. Although so-called creation science, or intelligent design, has been proposed as an alternative to evolutionary theory, and in some cases is taught alongside it in public schools, so far no non-Christian views on the creation of the universe have gained sufficient support in the U.S. to prompt them also to be taught in the public school system as competitors to evolutionary theory.

Existentialism - although it can be traced to earlier influences, it is primary understood today as a mid-twentieth-century European philosophical movement, much associated with post-World War II French intellectuals (philosophers, literary critics, authors, playwrights, etc.), that takes as its starting point the priority of the individual along with the assumption that, in the words of one of the best known representatives of the movement, Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), "existence precedes essence"—that is, historical human beings come before, and are thus the makers of, qualities and values. As Sartre also observes, human beings are therefore "condemned to be free"—that is, have no choice but to be accountable for their own actions, desires, and the values they produce. Existentialism, then, can be understood to be in opposition to essentialist approaches to the study of culture and meaning, though there were theological existentialists.

Faith - [Latin fides, meaning trust, confidence, reliance] a term today commonly used alongside "religion," sometimes assumed to be the essential element to the religious life; sometime in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe seems to be the first time we find "faith" used as a synonym for "religion." In the modern sense, faith (as in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's notion of "faith in transcendence") is often juxtaposed to the social or institutional sense of religion (what W. C. Smith termed the "accumulated tradition"), as in the distinction between "spiritual" and "religious" when the latter is assumed to denote the merely secondary, external, institutional, or ritual elements whereas the former denotes what is assumed to be the personal and core element that is merely symbolized or manifested in the institution. Given the sixteenth-century reformers' efforts to criticize, and eventually to replace, the institutions and authority of Roman Catholicism, prioritizing faith over religious institution, and criticizing the latter for the manner in which it unnecessarily stifles the former, remains a common anti-Catholic, or pro-Protestant, form of argumentation.

Faith-Based Initiative - a program created early in President George W. Bush's first administration (2000-2004) that financially supports community service organizations, some of which are run by local churches, religious
charities, and religious foundations while others are run by secular organizations. The relevance/controversy of this initiative is that, in the past, the U.S. Federal government has avoided supporting religiously identified organizations that carry out social services (such as operating day cares, food banks, homeless shelters, programs for alcoholics, etc.) due to the understood separation of Church and State in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. President George W. Bush is the first President to institute a federally funded program that some think crosses the line from separation to establishment. To read more on the Faith-Based Initiative, visit the U.S. Federal government's office of Faith-Based Initiatives.

**Family Resemblance** - an approach to defining something, first described by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that presupposes that no one characteristic is possessed by all members of a group but, instead, that a series of traits must be present, each to varying degrees, among the members of a group.

**First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution** - an amendment ratified in 1791 as a part of the Bill of Rights that prohibited Congress from interfering with the freedom of religion, speech, assembly, or petition. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

**Free Exercise Clause** - portion of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that denies Congress the right to prohibit the "free exercise" of religion. What exactly constitutes free exercise is unclear, however, and therefore open to debate. Congress does have the power to limit certain practices whether they are religious or not. A recent example of the debate is found in a 1992 U.S. Supreme Court case over whether city council in Florida could use their animal cruelty laws to curtail animal sacrifice as practiced by members of a Santeria group (Santeria, "the way of the saints," is a Caribbean tradition that combines elements of African and Roman Catholic religious practices). Read the decision here.

**Functionalism** - [Latin *functio*, meaning action, to perform] the view that, rather than some internal quality, things are defined by what they do and can be studied in terms of the purposes that they serve or the needs that they fulfill. Functionalists can study the social, political, or psychological role played by, for example, a myth or a ritual, examining how it functions either for the individual or how it contributes to maintaining an overall social structure into which the individual is placed.

**Greek** - [Graecus meaning the name applied by the Romans to the people called by themselves Hellenes] the Christian text commonly known as the New Testament was written in a script known as common or koine (pronounced "coin-ay") Greek. It is important to note that words/concepts that were once prominent in the Hellenistic world of early Christianity, and therefore used in the production of these texts, eventually were translated into Latin, and then into the many language that today comprise the text known as the Bible.

**Hermeneutics** - [Greek *hermeneutikos*, meaning translator or interpreter] the precise history of the term is unknown, though some trace it to the name of the Greek god Hermes (known by the Romans as Mercury) who served as a messenger for the gods; others trace it to Hermes Trismegistus, the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian god Thoth, said to have been the founder of alchemy and other such secret sciences. In any case, hermeneutics is that branch of study that deals with interpretation, both the act of interpretation as well as the academic study of the methods and theories of interpretation. Often associated with the interpretation of scripture, as in the long history of hermeneutics in the field of Biblical studies, hermeneutics presupposes that the object of study must be understood for its meaning and that this meaning can only be adequately understood if it is interpreted and translated in precise and correct ways; see phenomenology; positivism; reductionism.

**Hinduism** - [sindhu, meaning river, especially the body of water known today as the Indus River (in northeastern India); hence the region of the Indus, which today also names the entire nation-state of India] the name given to the mass social movement found originally in the sub-continent that is today known as India and dates to up to 1,500 years prior to the turn-of-the-era; those who practice Hinduism refer to it as Sanatanadharma; it is a term for indigenous Indian religions, and is characterized by a diverse array of belief systems, practices, institutions, and texts. It is believed to have had its origin in the ancient Indo-Aryan Vedic culture. Texts in Hinduism are separated into two categories: *shruti* (inspired [revealed scripture]) and *smriti* (remembered [epic literature]). The Veda, a body of texts recited by ritual specialists (brahmins) is considered shruti, whereas the *Bhagavad Gita* is considered to be smriti. Other smriti texts are the major epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Some of the commonly known deities are Vishnu, Brahma, Kali, Ganesha, Shiva, and Krishna. Studies of Hinduism will often focus on the role played by the *dharma* system (social system of duties and obligations), the caste system (similar to a class system but inherited), beliefs in *karma* (social actions result in future reactions), *atman* (the name for ones soul or self), and *samsara* (the term for the almost limitless cosmic system of rebirths), and the central role of *brahmins* (a caste of ritual specialists).

**History** - [Latin *historia*, meaning narrative, account, tale, story] by "history" we today mean at least two things: (1) a narrative about the accumulated, chronological past that either demonstrates development over time
or established lineage and (2) a more general usage that refers to the world of cause/effect in which unanticipated events intermingle with the intentions of agents. Saying that something is "an element of the historical world" therefore implies that the present is the result of past plans as well as accidents, which were themselves the results of yet other past plans and accidents. To say that something is "historical," therefore means that it is contingent, i.e., depends on prior things happening and therefore could have been otherwise.

**Human Nature** - a concept—sometimes termed the human spirit, the human condition, the human heart, or the human experience—that asserts all human beings hold some essential characteristic(s) that are universal and thus not bound by any notions of time or space. In other words, all human beings, from the beginning of time and spanning the entire present world, are said to share these characteristics, making them the defining element, or essence, of the human species as a species separable from all others. Some scholars of religion argue that religion, or religious experience, is the preeminent or fundamental aspect to this presumed human nature.

**Human Sciences** - those academic studies of minds, texts, institutions, political organization, and economic activity, that seek to develop theories that explain human behavior rather than offer an interpretation of, or appreciation for, the meaning of the behavior or its various artifacts (such as texts, art, architecture, etc.). This classification of work carried out in the modern university provides an alternative to the traditional division of social sciences versus humanities insomuch as the human sciences groups together fields previously studied separately in either of these other divisions, understanding all elements of human social life to be subject to the tools of observation, analysis, generalization, and explanation. Practiced as part of the human sciences, the study of religion seeks not to discover the meaning of religiosity but its causes and practical implications.

**Humanities** - an organizational title given to that area of the modern university that usually includes such academic disciplines as the study of literatures, languages, theater, philosophy, history—all of which are often presumed to study various expressions of the enduring human spirit as it is manifested in the conscious and intentional actions of human beings in different historical periods and regions. The academic study of religion is most often placed within humanities divisions of the university because its presumed object of study—religious experience—is often held to be a key ingredient to human nature; see also social sciences.

**Idealism** - [Latin idealis, meaning look, semblance, form, configuration, species, kind, class, sort, nature] a philosophical viewpoint that prioritizes mind or spirit over matter or the physical world, the latter being derived from the former; to be distinguished from materialism.

**Ideology** - first coined in late-eighteenth-century France, the term stood originally for the systematic study of ideas, or science of ideas, but soon came to stand in for both a complete system of ideas, or what we sometimes term a worldview, as well as an incorrect or false system of ideas (the former a more descriptive use of the term whereas the latter is a more normative use of the term). The term obtained its best known and most critical usage in the work of Karl Marx, where it was used to name the system of "false consciousness" within which oppressed people labored. Today the term retains this critical edge, though it is also used in a more neutral fashion, one that is synonymous with "philosophy" and "worldview."

**Induction** - [Latin inducere, meaning to lead into, to introduce] any form of reasoning in which a general conclusion is supported by the premises, but does not necessarily follow from them; inductive logic begins with the observation of specific cases and reasons to general conclusions based on this series of discrete observations. Classical scientific method, which prioritized observation and description, was thought to proceed inductively, in that a general conclusion (for example, about the law of gravity) followed from a series of experiments (such as repeatedly dropping an object and observing its behavior). Inductive conclusions are only as sound as the number of instances that support them (that is, how many spotted dogs must one see before one is confident in concluding: "All dogs are spotted"?), leading one to see that induction does not provide certain, but instead probable, knowledge; distinguished from deductive logic.

**Inference** - to derive a conclusion from something known or assumed to be the case, knowledge which was itself gained by means of either induction or deduction.

**Inter-religious Dialogue** - following the age of Christian missionizing, in which the conversion of so-called "heathens" was the goal, a more theologically and politically liberal movement began within Christianity in which some differences that came to be seen as merely secondary were put aside in favor of a common search for more fundamental similarities among religions. Mutual understanding and appreciation therefore take over from a previous era's attempt to judge and convert. As practiced by some, the academic study of religion is seen as one component of the effort to identify and nurture shared commonalities among the world's religions. For those who see the study of religion as part of the human sciences, such versions of the field are indistinguishable from liberal theology.

**Islam** - in Arabic meaning literally "submission," the name given to a collection of beliefs, practices, and institutions that date to the sixth and seventh centuries CE, originating in the Arabian peninsula, which place importance on the role played by the Prophet Muhammad who is believed to have received, by means of
recitations granted to him by an angel, the word of Allah (Arabic, "the God") which is contained in their scripture, known as the Qur'an (sometimes written in English as "Koran"). These revelations, which occurred in the area outside of the city of Mecca (today considered the central geographic site of Islam, toward which devout Muslims worldwide face when praying each day and to which they aim to make a pilgrimage at some point in their adult life), were eventually transcribed and today comprise the Qur'an's 114 suras, or chapter divisions, each of which have a number of verses. Merging indigenous Arabian cultural practices with elements of Jewish and Christian belief, Muslims (those who submit to the will of Allah) understand Muhammad to have been the last in a long line of prophetic figures (stretching from Abraham to Jesus); he is understood to have been the "seal of the prophets" (as in a stamp to close an envelope), all of whom conveyed the divine word, law, and instructions of Allah. After establishing the first Muslim community in the nearby city of Medina, Islam spread successfully throughout much of the then "known" world, stretching across north Africa, Europe, and well into Asia. Today it can be found all throughout the world. Early on in its development, disagreements over such things as leadership succession led to a division, leaving two main sub-types: Sunni and Shi'ite (a third sub-type, Sufism, is considered the mystical aspect of Islam)—all of which have their own sub-types, often based on differing traditions of legal and textual interpretation.

Judaism - the name given to a collection of beliefs, practices, and institutions that date at least to several hundred years prior to the turn-of-the-era and whose significant historical events transpired in the area of the world now known as the Middle East; although today considered a religious designation, to some it has always been an ethnic designation and—especially since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948—for yet others it designates a national identity (sometimes designating all three at once). The terms "Jew," "Jewish," and "Judaism" derive from the aneice Hebrew Y'hudai which is itself a derivative of the proper name Yhudah or Judah, which means "celebrated" and was the name of the fourth son of one of the group's ancient patriarchs, Jacob, as well as the name for the familial line (that is, tribe) that is said to have descended from him. Although one might talk of aneice Hebrew religion (involving twelve ancestral tribes, a distinctive role for the members of a priestly tribe, the centrality of temple worship, animal sacrifice, a period of enslavement in ancient Egypt, and a belief in a divine mandate to settle "the promised land"), after the Exilic period (in which it is held that, for much of the sixth century BCE, Hebrews were conquered by the ancient Babylonian empire (specifically, a group called the Chaldeans) and forcibly removed from their land) the centrality of textual interpretation, the role of the rabbi (Hebrew: master), and the place of the synagogue (Greek: assembly, as a translation for the late Hebrew, keneseth) came to supplant the prior place of the temple and priests. Along with legal traditions and traditions of rabbinic commentary, the main scripture is known as TANAKH, an acronym standing for the letters that signify the three main bodies of work that comprise what is sometimes called the Hebrew Bible: Torah (the Law, which comprises the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), Neviim (the writings attributed to the Prophets), and Ketuvim "the writings" (such as the more poetic book of Psalms that is attributed to the patriarch and onetime Hebrew King, David). Today, Jews are found worldwide and the modern state of Israel (the so-called "promised land") plays a particularly important role in the social identity for many Jews.

Li - Chinese term, associated with Confucianism, that names the rules of propriety (or proper form) associated with carrying out ritual and which influence all social interaction.

Linguistics - [Latin lingua, meaning tongue] the cross-cultural and comparative science of language as a human phenomenon, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and historical linguistics. In the late nineteenth century, when the cross-cultural study of languages was developing, it served as a model for the the development of the early science of religion—neither was concerned about simply studying this or that language, this or that religion, but with studying each as a universal human phenomenon (regardless which particular language one spoke or which specific religion one practiced), thereby necessitating the development of general theories of language and general theories of religion.

Materialism - [Latin materialis from materia, meaning the substance from which an object is made; the subject of a discourse (as in "subject matter")) a philosophical viewpoint that prioritizes matter or the physical world over mind or spirit, the latter being derived from the former; to be distinguished from idealism.

Metaphysics - [Greek meta-, meaning after, following + physiké, meaning nature and the world of production] the Greek phrase, ta meta ta physika, meant literally "that which is after the physics," implying early cataloguing/placement of an unnamed text by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) after another of his works, entitled Physics, that dealt with the natural world or, what he termed, Being that is endowed with motion (that is, self-determination, motivation, or will, something not possessed by art). The untitled text that followed Physics in early collections of Aristotle's works dealt with questions of origin and first principles; it traditionally went by the name of Metaphysics. What was therefore originally a term of classification therefore comes today to stand for that branch of philosophy that addresses questions of Being, reality, existence, the origins of the universe, etc. Today the prefix meta- is often used to signify theoretical work, or work that examines
assumptions that operate behind scholarship, as in the difference between developing a theory of religion as opposed to studying theories of religion themselves: meta-theory; see positivism.

**Monothetic and Polythetic Definitions** - deriving from Greek for either one, alone (mono-) or many, much (poly-) that are "capable of placing," as in one-placement and many-placements. Monothetic definitions, which can be essentialist or functionalist, assume a limited set of necessary characteristics or purposes whereas polythetic (or what might also be termed multi-factoral) definitions identify a range of traits or functions, none of which is sufficient in order for the object to qualify as a member of a class.

**Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans** - Latin phrase coined by the German Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto to name the awe-some (fascinating and full of awe) mystery that, he argued in his German work on comparative theology, *Das Heilige* (1917; translated as *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923), was the object common to all forms of religious experience.

**Myth** - [Greek mythos, meaning word, story, or narrative; traced back to an argument of Plato's in his ancient Greek dialogue entitled *The Republic*, "myth" comes to designate fanciful, false, or fictional narratives that are to be distinguished from historical narrative or rational discourses (Greek, logos) commonly used to refer to narratives that are transmitted orally and tell of supernatural beings that can accomplish deeds that humans cannot. For idealist scholars, myth, conceived as the expression of certain modes of thought, was understood to come before, and thus inspire, ritual. "Myth" as a classification is now often used by functionalist scholars of religion to refer to any narrative that is used by a group of people to satisfy any basic need that a society or an individual may have.

**Nation-State** - [Latin natio, meaning stock or race, "that which has been born"; as in native + Latin status, meaning "position, the manner of standing, ones condition, as in the condition of a region or place) a term for modern, large-scale social units that combines the earlier sense of an ethnic or ancestral group (a nation, clan, or tribe) with the more recent political sense of a group organized around legal principles (such as those who possess citizenship not as a birthright but as an identity adopted by means of legal procedures). Often, nationalism, understood as an expression of ones political identity, is distinguished from patriotism with only the latter being understood as positive. This distinction is spurious for it is apparent that the same behavior (singing songs, marching, displaying flags and military hardware, engaging in nationalist rhetorics, presumptions that God is on ones side during a time of war, etc.) when practiced by ones enemies is classified as nationalistic whereas when practiced by ones own group of ones allies it constitutes benign patriotism.

**Naturalistic Theories of Religion** - as opposed to theological approaches to the study of religion that assume that the basis of religion is to be found in a supernatural source (such as God, the gods, etc.), naturalistic approaches presuppose that those beliefs, behaviors, or institutions classified as "religious" are in fact mundane elements of the so-called natural world—that is, the historical, cultural world. In this sense, "natural" does not necessarily carry the connotation of "inevitable" or "the way it ought to be" but, instead, is linked to an earlier sense of "natural science" in that it is the systematic study of the empirical (observable with one of the five senses) world. Of course this is to be distinguished from what was once called "natural religion"—the onetime effort to establish such things as the existence of God from observable evidence, such as the so-called design argument (that is, the complex workings of the natural world betray the existence of a design and a design necessitates the existence of a designer). Although early contributors to a naturalistic approach to religion can be dated to several centuries ago—notably the Scottish philosopher David Hume's book, *A Natural History of Religion* (1757)—they began to flourish in the late-nineteenth century and today involve the work of, among others, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and cognitive scientists.

**Orientalism** - [Latin orientem, meaning the east, or from where the sun rises] a term that has traditionally named a scholarly discipline, at its height in nineteenth-century Europe, that takes as its subject matter the study of the Arab world (the so-called Orient or "Mystic East"), its history, language, and contemporary customs, religion, and politics. It is this sense of the term that we today find in the name for the University of London's well-known School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), founded in 1916. More critically, "Orientalism" now often stands for a particular attitude toward what scholars term "the Other"; in this sense, most famously examined in a book by this title by the Columbia University literary critic Edward Said (1935-2003), Orientalism names a widespread strategy whereby groups create a sense of themselves as distinct from others by generating powerfully negative and easily reproduced caricatures and stereotypes of those from whom they see themselves to differ. In Said's analysis (*Orientalism* [1978]), the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century preoccupation among Europeans intent on studying "the Orient"—learning its languages, mapping it, studying its culture, and writing novels about its mystery and danger—functioned to create a representation of the Orient that reflected not actual traits in this distant part of the world, but instead, functioned to reinforce a sense of superiority and order at home. Given that today the term "Orient" refers not to the so-called Middle East (and such modern countries as Egypt, Israel, Syria, etc.) but to parts of Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, etc.), it should be evident that this term is plastic and can be applied to
whomever the apparent in-group sees as different from themselves and thus unknown.

Phenomenology - [Greek phainomenon, to appear] the descriptive and systematic study of that which appears or that which presents itself; to be distinguished from ontology [Greek ontos, being], the philosophical study of being or ultimate reality, as well as metaphysics. Although first developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy (notably the work of the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl [1859-1938]), early on scholars of religion adapted phenomenological methods to develop a technique for studying claims, symbols, practices, and institutions that seemed to defy rational explanation (such as belief in an afterlife or rebirth). The term "phenomenology of religion" is credited to the Dutch scholar, P. D. [Pierre Daniel] Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920). This approach avoids assessing the truth or reality of such claims, studying instead what is assumed to be the public forms taken by what is often termed a symbol's essence. Phenomenologists of religion, many of whom would also be termed comparativists, therefore work to describe what appears to them rather than judging it or criticizing it. They are therefore well-known for advocating empathy as well as the bracketing (or setting aside) of assumptions and preconceived notions when one confronts unfamiliar data. Phenomenological method therefore presupposes both the objectivity of observers as well as their ability to identify with the experiences and meanings of the people they study; see hermeneutics; positivism; reductionism.

Pietas - the Latin term, from which we derive the English word "piety," that is commonly (although perhaps misleadingly) translated by many people today as "religion." In the classical world, "piety," like eusebia and din, denoted a quality that resulted when one fulfilled ones social obligations and duties, which involved everything from properly performing rituals toward the gods to treating ones superiors, peers, and inferiors properly—that is, according to custom and the accepted rule of propriety. The common assumption today, prevent in the Euro-North American world and especially within the Christian tradition, that "religion" denotes an inner faith or experience therefore interiorizes or privatizes that which, in antiquity, was considered a public trait linked to observable behaviors one would or would not perform satisfactorily.

Political Economy - the systematic study (science) of the manner in which systems that govern power and privilege are interconnected with systems that govern patterns of exchange and the valuation of commodities; the earlier name for what is today often referred to simply as economics.

Positivism - Although for some "positivism" is used along with "reductionistic" to name a attitude toward the study of culture that—at least for those who fall in the theological, hermeneutic, and humanistic traditions—is seen as overly reliant on the effort to reduce the meaning of a participant's testimony to observable, and thus predictable, facts, more properly it is termed "Logical Positivism"—a term derived originally from the work of the early French social theorist, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), and which refers to an originally Austrian and German philosophical school of thought (which exerted great influence in North America as well) that dates to the early decades of the twentieth century. Members of the so-called "Vienna Circle" of philosophers developed a system of rules for establishing which propositions were and were not meaningful and thus the proper topic of scientific discourse; their system thereby classified many of the traditional topics addressed within the field known as metaphysics (e.g., Does God Exist?) as meaningless. Their "verifiability principle" ensured that only those propositions that could conceivably be tested empirically or logically, and thereby found either to correspond to some observable state of affairs in the natural world or to obey the rules of logic, were meaningful—others were classified as nonsensical or, as in the case of statements on morality, merely emotive. Experience and the use of human reason to organize experience and generalize from experience, were, therefore, the only basis for knowledge, and facts were understood to be independent of human consciousness and intention, thereby ensuring that objectivity was an attainable goal. Reaching the peak of their influence by the mid-twentieth century, it was realized that logical positivists' criterion of verifiability itself did not obey their own rules; this presented an empirical and logical problem that could not be overcome—although the philosopher of science, Karl Popper (1902-1994), revised this principle as the falsifiability criterion, whereby scientific propositions were those that could, conceivably, be empirically tested and, at least potentially, disproved. Until such a time as a proposition was disproved (such as "All dogs have four legs"), it could be used "as if" it was true, recognizing that one can never arrive at certain knowledge based on induction. Although few scholars of religion would today classify themselves as positivists in the earlier sense of the term, the goal of distinguishing participant claims from claims about participants—relying, to varying degrees, on the distinction between values and facts—yet remains for some scholars of religion.

Profane - [Latin profanus, from pro + fanus, meaning before, as in outside or in front of, the temple] considered the opposite of sacred. That which was not admitted into the temple, or done while in the temple, which extends to notions of not consecrated, ritually unclean, polluted, or improper (as in "profanity" used to signify improper speech.

Prototype - the original or model on which something is based or formed; something that serves to illustrate the typical qualities of a class or group. For so-called Western scholars, Christianity is often unconsciously the prototypical religion, providing the model by which one judges other religions. Although Islam is not the worship
of the Prophet Mohammad, the name by which it was once known in Europe—"Mohammadism"—provides a useful illustration of how earlier European scholars used their knowledge of the centrality of Jesus Christ in a religion that, to them, was familiar (that is, Christianity), as the model for naming and thereby comprehending Islam. That prototypes are necessary for cognition is not argued by contemporary scholars; instead, what is argued is that prototypes are not to be understood or used as ideal cases. Rather, they are working models that require adjustment when new information is acquired. The selection of features to be included in family resemblance definitions are generally thought to be arise from a prototype with which one happens to be familiar.

**Psychology** - the systematic study (science) of the mind or of mental states and processes; psychology of religion is but one among a number of subfields of the academic study of religion.

**Q** - [German Quelle, meaning source or origin] "Q" is the shorthand scholars use to name a document hypothesized to have existed and been in distribution among members of the earliest groups that eventually become known as Christianity. Based on the study of the so-called synoptic Gospels (one eye, implying to view together; a term given in the late eighteenth century to the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke)—which possess similar narrative structure and content, though which differ on significant details of the story of Jesus life, teachings, and resurrection—historians and literary theorists hypothesized that one or another of the three existed first and that subsequent authors must have had access to the earliest, from which they borrowed material. For those who argue for the priority of the Gospel of Mark—and there are those who argue for the priority of Matthew—those passages that do not appear whatsoever in the text of Mark (which is by far the shortest Gospel) and which are common to Matthew and Luke (many of which are "sayings" of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount's Beatitudes ["Blessed are the poor..."]) are thought to have derived from a separate document, also in circulation at the time but no longer in existence. Scholars who advocate this "two source hypothesis," therefore attempt, through their analysis of the texts in existence, to reconstruct Q.

**Rational Choice Theory** - a modern form of social theory, applied to the study of religion, and derived from theories of economics that attempted to account for the means by which consumers made their selections among alternatives. Rational choice theory, favored by a number of U.S. sociologists of religion, argues that such things as church membership are based on a series of sensible decisions made by participants, based on their assessment of costs and benefits (or gains and losses). For those benefits that cannot be had immediately (or in this life, such as justice), a series of compensators are drawn upon that make up for the lack of the primary goal.

**Reductionism** - an approach to the creation of new knowledge that attempts to account for one level of phenomena in terms of a more basic series of propositions, much as observations from the world of biology (such as monitoring the growth rate of cells) can be explained by reducing them to the language of chemistry, which in turn can be reduced to the theories of physics. In the study of religion, reductionism is often criticized for "throwing the baby out with the bathwater"; in other words, those who presume that religion is sui generis argue that reducing religion to, for example, sociology, and thereby explaining it completely as a sociological phenomenon, misses the irreducibly religious character of the belief, act, symbol, or institution. Although religion undoubtedly has a social dimension, as Ninian Smart would have argued, it cannot completely be reduced to sociology—or psychology, or politics, or economics, for that matter. For yet others who consider religion to be a thoroughly human institution, there is no choice but to study it by means of reductionistic, naturalistic theories derived from such domains as psychology, sociology, etc. In fact, even scholars who favor non-reductionistic approaches have little choice but to reduce, since their cross-cultural work necessarily must use comparative categories, such as Mircea Eliade's use of "the sacred," by means of which the language of participants is reduced to the language of the analyst; see hermeneutics; phenomenology; positivism

**Religion** - the precise etymology (or derivation) of the modern word religion is unknown. There are, however, several possible roots from which the term derives. Most commonly, the Latin words religare (to be careful, mindful) and religare (to bind together) are cited as possible precursors. Whereas the Roman writer Cicero (106–43 BCE) favored the first option, the later Christian writer Lactantius (250–325 CE) favored the latter. In his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who is among the more noted scholars to have investigated the category's history, suggests that both streams—one emphasizing the private disposition to be mindful whereas the other emphasizes the more objective sense of social processes that build identity—may have coalesced into the Latin religio. Jonathan Z. Smith, also among the scholars to have devoted attention to this problem, observes in an essay entitled "Religion, Religions, Religious" (in Mark C. Taylor [ed.], *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 1998) that in Roman and early Christian Latin literature the nouns religio and religiones, as well as the adjective religiousus and the adverb religiosus, were all employed mainly with reference to, in his words, "careful performance of ritual obligations"—as in the modern sense of a "conscientious repetitive action such as 'She reads the morning newspaper religiously.'" If this is chosen as our origin for the modern term, then there is some irony in the fact that today it is often used to refer to an inner sentiment or affectation rather than within the context of ritual, routinized behavior. As J. Z. Smith has pointed out, the fact that ethics and etiquette books
immediately precede books on religion in the U.S. Library of Congress catalog system may carry with it this earlier sense of religion as carefully performed behavior. Regardless which etymology one chooses, the term "religion" remains troublesome for those who presuppose some (truer or more valuable) essence to lie beneath the term—whether that essence is, as W. C. Smith argued, "faith in transcendence" (in distinction from the outer "cumulative tradition," as he phrased it) or whether it is some more specific item, such as famously argued by the Swiss Protestant theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968), who criticized "religion" (that is, what he understood as inessential outward ritual and institution) as sinful (inasmuch as it was human beings trying to know God—whether those human beings were or were not Christian), as opposed to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (which, he believed, was bestowed upon humans by God). That this approach has little, if anything, in common with the academic study of religion should be clear to the reader.

Religionswissenschaft - a German term that roughly translates as the science of religion (Wissenschaft = systematic study of).

Ritual - a system of actions that, according to their practitioners, is used by a group of people to directly relate to superhuman beings; these actions may consist of worship, sacrifice, prayer, etc. Any set of actions that is supposed to facilitate interaction between humans and superhuman beings. For materialist scholars, ritual is often presumed to predate myth insomuch as routinized behaviors are thought to provide the physical conditions in which meaning systems (and hence mythic narratives) can take place. Scholars study ritual behaviors in terms of their psychological, sociological, political, even their economic causes and implications. That some behaviors one might classify as a "habit" (for instance, regularly brushing ones teeth) could just as easily be classified as a "ritual" suggests that there is a great deal at stake in how one classifies behaviors as well as in the particular theory of behavior that one uses to guide ones classifications (on theories of ritual, see the work of Catherine Bell).

Sacred, the - [Latin sacer, meaning set apart, dedicated, distinguished, as in set apart from the public or mundane world]; to be distinguished from profane. Although widely used as an adjective (e.g., sacred texts) "the Sacred" is a term of choice for Mircea Eliade, used to describe that which is shared in common among all religions and that which manifests itself in varied forms throughout the symbols of the world's religions: the experience of the Sacred. Akin to other essentialists who name the object of this experience as the Holy (Rudolf Otto) or Power (Gerardus van der Leeuw), or even religious experience (William James).

Sanatana-dharma - a compound Sanskrit term meaning the eternal or cosmic system of duties (dharma = system of social obligations, as in people "doing their dharma"), implying a universal moral order comprised of countless beings all diligently carrying out their proper social and ritual action; it is the term used by some practitioners of Hinduism to refer to their cultural practices as unchanging and divinely sanctioned.

Sanskrit - an ancient Indo-European language that began on the Indian subcontinent; somewhat like Latin once functioned in the Roman Catholic Church, it is the ritual language used in the sacred texts of Hinduism and some of the texts of Buddhism.

Semiotics - the systematic study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative systems of behavior; a theory of signs based upon linguistic theory which assumes that meaning is not an essential quality expressed by symbols but, instead, the result of relationships established and managed by means of structures (such as a grammar or the rules of a game).

Social Sciences - an organizational title given to that area of the modern university that usually includes such academic disciplines as economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science; in distinction from the humanities, the social sciences seeks to generate testable theories, often on a model similar to the way knowledge is gained in the so-called "hard sciences" (e.g., chemistry, physics, etc.). Since the social sciences study the actions and motivations of conscious subjects, they are sometimes known as the "soft sciences," since their findings are sometimes critiqued as more interpretive and thus open to debate than the work carried out in other sciences. Because many in the academic study of religion understand their object of study to refer to an inner experience of tremendous meaning to the participant, this field is most often placed within the humanities, though it is occasionally found in social sciences divisions of the university; see also human sciences.

Sociology - [Latin socius, meaning companion + logos, meaning word, speech, discourse, reason] the science or the study of the origin, development, organization, and functioning of human society; the science of the fundamental laws of social relations and institutions. The sociology of religion is but one subfield of the academic study of religion.

Structuralism - developing from out of the context of the structural functionalist approach, once dominant in cultural anthropology, structuralism names an approach to the study of meaning systems (such as language or culture) much associated with the the ground-breaking work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908). Structural functionalists used a biological metaphor to understand social systems, seeing them as comprised of discrete and empirically observable units, such as: kinship systems, systems that govern the exchange of goods, system to govern the payment of debts, and rituals (such as rites of passage from one status to another)—all of
which could be observed by the ethnographer (one who writes about another group of people). In playing their various roles and each fulfilling their separate function, they collectively contributed to the overall well-being of the unit. Contrary to this position, structuralists argue that the structure is not in the external world but, instead, is in the human mind itself. Through studying paired oppositions that occur in such things as rituals or myths (such as up/down, in/out, male/female, light/dark, cooked/raw, etc.), Lévi-Strauss argued that scholars could decode the means by which groups of people set about ordering their worlds, classifying its components, establishing their relationships, and in the process making the world sensible and inhabitable. In this regard, structuralism owes much to the Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), whose early work in linguistics and semiotics provided the basis for a critique of the correspondence theory of meaning. Saussure argued that, for example, the symbol ‘i’ means what it does because it is placed in relation to the symbols ‘h’ and ‘j’ (when understood in terms of this thing we know as ‘the alphabet’) or in relation to, say, the symbols ‘i’ and ‘t,’ as in the thing we know as the word ‘fit.’ And ‘fit’ has meaning because it is in relation to ‘fat’; in other words, meaning is not an essential trait (that is, ‘i’ does not correspond to some i-ness); instead, meaning is the result of a series of relations of similarity and difference that is established by an overall structure.

**Sui Generis** - [Latin, designates a thing that belongs to its own kind; peculiar; unique; self-caused] this term has been used to designate the claim that religion or religious experience is of a kind wholly unique and thus irreducible. If religion is sui generis then it is a thing of a kind incomparable with any other social institution or practice and therefore cannot be explained using a naturalistic theory of religion. Arguments for the sui generis nature of religion were successfully used in the 1950s and 1960s to help establish autonomous Departments of Religious Studies—in so much as the studies of anthropologists or sociologists, to name but two, were thought to overlook and obscure the irreducible element (or essence): religious experience.

**Theism** - [Greek theos, meaning god] a philosophical position to name a family of belief systems that presuppose the existence of God or gods; sub-types could include such belief systems as monotheism (belief in one God) or polytheism (belief in many gods); to be distinguished from atheism.

**Theory** - [Greek theoria, meaning to look at, implying to observe, to consider, to speculate upon] a term that presupposes a distinction between reflection upon principles and causes as opposed to a form of practice; sometimes used as synonymous with philosophy, viewpoint, or speculation, it can, however, be defined in a technical, scientific manner to signify a series of logically related and testable propositions that aim to account for a certain state of affairs in the observable world. Meta-theory (see metaphysics) generally signifies rational reflection upon the principles that underly theoretical work. For Marxist scholars, the apparent separation between theory and practice is problematic, for theory too is a form of practical labor, and theory relies on practice which is itself directed by theory; they therefore often employ the term ‘praxis’ to signify the correlation of, and dialectical relationship between, these two seemingly distinct domains.

**Theodicy** - [Greek theos + diké, meaning the justice of god] term coined by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) to name the problem of justifying belief in the goodness of an all-powerful divine being in light of routine empirical observations of what could be called evil in the world. Traditionally, the problem has been divided by European philosophers into three propositions that, it is argued, cannot all be held simultaneously (what is called a trilemma, as opposed to a mere dilemma): 1. God is all-powerful (omnipotent); God is all-loving (omnibenevolent); Evil exists. Solving the problem of evil therefore requires one either to forsake one proposition in favor of the other two (e.g., evil exists because God is not all-powerful) or to adapt one or more propositions such that the trilemma is avoided (e.g., although it seems like evil to us, to God it is not). Theistic philosophers have also worked to develop ways to distinguish among types of evil that need to be addressed, such as moral evils, for which an intentional agent can be held accountable (and the evil thus explained as the result of free will) and natural evils, such as earthquakes (which do not appear to be the result of an intentional agent’s actions). Although this is largely a Christian philosophical issue, Max Weber argued that the Hindu doctrine of **karma** (the law of action, past deeds influence future states of affairs) was but one more attempt to address the problem of evil.

**Theology** - [Greek theos, meaning god + logos, meaning word, speech, discourse, reason] taken from the Greek, this term designates the academic discussion and study of God or the gods; “theology” is commonly used today to signify the systematic study of Christian dogmas and doctrines, as carried out by a member of the group, but can be applied to any articulate and systematic discourse by members of a particular religion concerning their own tradition’s meaning or proper practice or their tradition’s view of others. It is to be distinguished from an anthropological approach to the study of religion in which human behaviors, not the actions of the gods, are the object of study.
Notes:

1. For example, in the preamble to the 1901 Constitution of the state of Alabama we read, "We, the people of the State of Alabama, in order to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God, do ordain and establish the following Constitution and form of government for the State of Alabama."

2. Although Alabama's Attorney General at the time—Bill Pryor, who as of 2004 was appointed to a position on the Federal U.S. Appeals Court—successfully prosecuted the Chief Justice, he had previously defended him (prior to Moore's election as Chief Justice). When Moore was a County Judge in the late 1990s Pryor unsuccessfully defended the Judge's right to post the Commandments in his own county courthouse. Examples of local news coverage of events surrounding the monument and trials can be found here. Judge Roy Moore's own web site can be found here. Additional information on religion and civil liberties in the US can be found here.

3. Although Tyler's definition obviously reinforces a still common presumption—that religion is primarily defined in terms of a belief system involving immaterial beings—he nevertheless made a significant improvement on past efforts to define religion by selecting "spiritual beings" rather than 'God' or 'gods.' This change enabled cross-cultural work among a variety of data that, prior to Tyler, would easily have been dismissed by scholars inasmuch as it would have been compared to the so-called Christian revelation and judged inadequate. That Tyler also proceeded naturalistically, seeing religion as an element of human history and culture, helps to ensure his place in the field's history despite his emphasis on religion as an internal, cognitive element.

4. Durkheim's study of the social function of ritual systems takes as its data the social system of the Australian Aborigines, in particular the system of social organization based on what was once widely known throughout nineteenth-century scholarship as the totem—an animal or plant that comes to symbolize the group. He studied this group not because it was assumed to be the most ancient and thus pure origin from which modern social systems have evolved (an assumption earlier scholars might have shared), but, instead, because Durkheim believed that such a small scale society, with a low division of labor (that is, a society not based on a high degree of specialization when it comes to the tasks required to reproduce the life of the group), contained fewer uncontrollable variables and thus provided a better test cast to develop his theory. Once developed from this case, Durkheim believed his findings could be generalized to all human communities.

5. The Euthyphro was likely written sometime around 380 BCE. Sometimes it is published today on its own, but often it is included as part of a collection of four Platonic dialogues that narrate the trial, conviction, and eventual death of Socrates, who is condemned to death by drinking poison (the other dialogues included in this collection are entitled: Apology, Crito, and Phaedo). An online English version of the text of the Euthyphro can be found here.

6. Martin's book on ancient Greek religion—which has been translated into a variety of languages—is among the best known introductions to this area of scholarship. It is a particularly important period and region to study for those interested in the Graeco-Roman social world from which the earliest forms of Christianity arose.


8. Although Freud discusses religion at a variety of places in his many writings, this brief essay may be the most succinct statement of his views on the common function played by obsessive compulsive disorders, on the one hand, and ceremonials, or rituals, on the other.

9. Wittgenstein goes on to ask, "How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe games to him, and we might add: this and similar things are called 'games'. And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none has been drawn" (section 69).

10. Subtitled, 'Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa,' Chidester's book chronicles in detail the gradual movement among Europeans—upon first making contact with the people of southern Africa—from first concluding that the locals had no religion whatsoever (because their beliefs, practices, and institutions did not match the prototype operating in the colonialists' minds), to eventually seeing their local practices as indeed being religious, despite the judgment that they were merely primitive or degraded forms of religion. His study is therefore a useful example of how prototypes are often used as
11. Alston, a well-known Christian philosopher of religion who taught philosophy at Syracuse University, adds: "If it is true that the religion-making characteristics neither singly nor in combination constitute tight necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a religion, and yet that each of them contributes to making something a religion, then it must be that they are related in some looser way to the application of the term. Perhaps the best way to put it is this. When enough of these characteristics are present to a sufficient degree, we have a religion" (p. 142). Of course the difficulty with such an approach to definition is that we have not theorized what counts as "enough ... characteristics" and "sufficient degree."


13. Tim Fitzgerald, author of The Ideology of Religious Studies (Oxford University Press, 2000), is a well-known critic of how the category "religion" is employed by scholars who do cross-cultural studies. "Why," he asks in the introduction to this book, "do competent and even brilliant scholars continue to publish books and articles on the religious of non-western societies when, often by their own admission, it is exceedingly difficult if not impossible to fit the word with a legitimate referent?" His answer? The category "religion," as traditionally defined, is one among a number of tools whereby those who study other cultures extend, authorize, and reproduce a particular image of world and its organization—an image that has political and economic implications. "Religion," he therefore concludes, "was part of the complex process of establishing the naturalness and ideological transparency of capitalist and individualist values" (9).

14. The title of Lakoff's book refers to the manner in which things are classified in traditional Dyirbal, one of the indigenous languages of Australia. "Whenever a Dyirbal speaker uses a noun in a sentence, the noun must be preceded by a variant of one of four words: bayi, balan, balam, bala. These words classify all objects in the Dyirbal universe" (92). Scholars interested in understanding the use of this classification system have therefore studied the emic principles whereby, for example, men, bats, the moon, rainbows, and most fishes are commonly preceded by bayi whereas women, some fishes, most birds, fire, and dangerous things are commonly preceded by balan. One such principle is called the domain-of-experience principle, such that things which generally occur together in experience are linked cognitively, such as fish and fishing implements. Though a series of other principles also come into play, some of which take priority when a category falls into more than one domain.

15. This collection of seven essays, covering a variety of topics (from data derived from ancient Babylon and Judaism, to such more contemporary issues as attempts to understand the actions of those social movements commonly known as "cults"), has attained the status of a modern classic in the study of religion. Despite the wide variety of data examined in the book, it is possible to read it as an extended mediation, supplemented by a rich amount of cross-cultural information, on how to go about doing comparative scholarship. For this reason, those who are interested in studying what is commonly known as "method and theory" have found Smith's work to be particularly important.


17. Smith is also the author of Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste (Oxford University Press, 1994), which examines the manner in which the inherited Indian system that divides labor and roles embodies and thereby puts into practice a system of order and thus power.

18. This essay, entitled simply "Classification," is a survey of the importance placed upon studies of classification systems in other disciplines. Smith concludes that both those systems named as religions, as well as the very systems that name these movements as religions, are classification systems that deserve considerably more scholarly attention.

19. This following is taken from Russell T. McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia (Oxford University Press, 1997).