

Defining Religion

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All religious systems want to come to grips with the unseen, the essence of existence and of life. They want to bridge the visible world with that which is unseen and unknown (Ness 2). But the term *religion* can and does mean many different things, depending upon the context in which it is used. There really is no comprehensive definition of religion on which all scholars agree. And, as such, several viewpoints should be examined. Also the *way* to define should be studied so that we can come to a clearer understanding of the nature of religion.

Three Perspectives

The perspectives of the three individuals presented below—Paul Tillich, Abraham Maslow, and Melford Spiro—will give an idea of how broadly religion can be perceived.

Tillich

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was a Christian theologian. He attempted “to restore lost harmony in (humankind’s) relations with the Judeo-Christian tradition, with culture, and with nature” (Hagan 7). Any “lost harmony” may have been due to the misplaced focus on materialism, so any efforts on Tillich’s part to help people understand the true nature of religion was worthwhile. He wrote that religion was “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life” (Tillich 4). His term “ultimate concern” has been criticized by some for being vague. But reading his definition above within the context of his work certainly helps to qualify its meaning.

Some religious individuals have had difficulty accepting Tillich’s views, especially since they were often expressed using secular terminology. But the use of that language of scholarly

rather than anthropomorphic terms was thereby beneficial by being able to appeal to a broader spectrum of people. He helped blur the line between “the two most essential characteristics of religious faith claimed by religion: a specific god who gives specific belief” (Hagan 8). Tillich did so by characterizing religious faith as the ultimate or most important concern that humans can have, and both the god and the faith were part of one system of religious perspective.

Maslow

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) was an American psychologist who is often considered the father of the humanist movement. He conceptualized a hierarchy of human needs, and diagrammed that hierarchy in the figure of a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid were needs considered basic for survival, those enabling homeostasis. After survival needs were met, focus was placed on safety needs. Maslow’s belief was that needs at each level must be satisfied before needs at a higher level are deemed of importance. The highest level, in his view, was that of transcendence—the highest potential possible for a human being.

Maslow’s theories helped people become better, higher-functioning people, but he never mentioned God at any level of his model. His concept of “peak experience” could therefore be considered a concept of lifestyle or frame of mind, rather than one of a traditionally religious nature. Maslow’s peak experiences are more about the depth of the human spirit than about the realm of religion, unless of course, a definition of religion excluding God is used. Nevertheless, he observed that peak experiences provided people with similar happiness to that of religious joy. “For Maslow ... ordinary, healthy, integrated, and happy human experience is the essence of religion” (Hagan 12). The closest Maslow came to mentioning God in his list of 34 meanings of transcendence was in the one in which he mentioned that one becomes “divine or godlike” (Farther 264). He was quick, however, to qualify that it meant to be metahuman or to go beyond

what was typically human, rather than meaning anything connected with extrahuman or the supernatural.

Of his list of 34 meanings of transcendence, Maslow wrote that the ultimate transcendence was the “transcendence of dichotomies ... to rise from dichotomies to superordinate wholes” (Farther 263). In his belief, moving beyond the concept that polarities and either-or situations are necessary was the greatest form of transcendence that one could realize.

Maslow believed that “religionizing one part of life tends to secularize the rest of it” (Religions 31). As one who did not express faith in God, that was certainly true for Maslow or for anyone else who can compartmentalize religion. But it surely is not true for many others whose religion includes God and influences all they believe, see and do in life.

Spiro

Melford E. Spiro is a contemporary anthropologist who, in his essay “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” wrote that religion can be understood as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Kessler 41). By also being trained in psychoanalysis, he had a keen sense that instinctive human nature, including that of a protective family structure, played a huge role in all human functions, including religious development. His focus on the cultural aspect of religion is distinct from Maslow’s humanistic viewpoint and Tillich’s godly viewpoint. Spiro saw that values, beliefs, history and traditions that various cultures have had about religion helped them develop their varieties of mythological beliefs and religious practices.

Attributes of a Definition

After introducing Tillich, Maslow, and Spiro, it is clear that the diversity of beliefs about what constitutes religion is broad. It is therefore appropriate to discuss the properties of a sound

definition. A proper definition of religion would have a number of attributes that, when combined, make it more comprehensible. A definition of religion is one that should be analytically useful, precise, and as free from unmerited bias as is reasonably possible (Kessler 33). It should also have meaning and should address the issue of the existence of God.

Usefulness

From laypeople to scholars, different people have different uses for a definition of religion. Historians will have one use for it, sociologists might have another use for it, and psychologists would have yet another use for a definition of religion. Kessler described two types of measures, unidimensional and multidimensional, that help determine usefulness.

Unidimensional A unidimensional measure deals with one specific aspect of an issue. A newspaper reporter doing a simple survey on belief in God might find such a measure of immediate use. Consider a single, simple query such as “Do you believe in God?” The three possible responses on the questionnaire would be “yes,” “no”, and “uncertain.” The responses could be diagrammed with ease on a pie chart or a bar graph. The problem with this particular example of a unidimensional measure is that it leaves out much information that might be of interest and that might help qualify how belief in God affects the *practice* of religion.

Multidimensional To get a broader understanding of what it means to be religious, a multidimensional measure incorporating several different factors is of value. For example, the following questions might be added to the “Do you believe in God?” questionnaire: “How often do you attend religious services?” “How often do you pray?” “Are you involved in activities at your religious institution other than attending services?” “Were you influenced by your parents to select your particular religion?” By using multidimensional measures, relationships and correlations can be ascertained (e.g., “What percentage of those who believe in God choose not

to attend religious services?”).

Precision

The second of Kessler’s three components of a sound definition is that of precision. A definition of religion should be as precise and as clear as possible. Definitions should have boundaries or limitations so that their scopes are refined. Scopes drawn too narrowly will result in the omission of relevant data. Scopes drawn too broadly will include too much peripheral data. Some phrases are unclear unless their component parts are also defined. Kessler pointed out that “terms (like ultimate concern) are so vague that practically anything can fit within their boundaries” (35). The “ultimate concern” of an investment banker may be the creation and maintenance of wealth. The “ultimate concern” of a world class marathoner may be to time peak conditioning so perfectly as to show up at scheduled races in optimal physical shape. But it is apparent that belief in God need not necessarily be a part of the ultimate concern of either the banker or the athlete.

Essentialism The purpose of definitions is to try to state the essence of something. The essence of a glass window is the set of qualities it possesses that differentiates it from a drinking glass. There are two types of essentialism definitions: substantive definitions and functional definitions. A substantive definition of religion attempts to state what religion *is*, while a functional definition of religion would state what it *does* (i.e., its role in culture).

Cluster definitions The grouping of traits or characteristics can be described as cluster definitions. There may be no *necessary* traits required, but by grouping two or more of them, an understanding of the whole is enhanced. William P. Alston, a contemporary religious philosopher, compiled a list of nine characteristics that, as a whole, or in partial groupings, help explain what religion is (Kessler 36):

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
6. Prayer and other forms of communication with gods
7. A worldview, or general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual therein
8. A more or less total organization of one's life based on the worldview
9. A social group bound together by the above

Perhaps other characteristics could arguably be added, but Alston's list gives an idea of how multiple ideas can be collectively considered to approach a more comprehensive definition of religion.

Free of Bias

Freedom from bias is the third of three of Kessler's components that make up a sound definition. Different types of bias may influence perception, and may therefore influence definitions. Kessler discussed five different types of bias that may affect how one would define religion (37-40).

Western Bias One form of bias is that of Western bias. In other words, the way we (in the West) view history shapes and influences how we use words. The word *religion* originated from the Latin *religio*, and early Latin Christians used it to describe their worship and their focus on reverence. The word later came to be used to describe various religious traditions around the world. We use the word now to describe those other religious traditions, but other practitioners around the globe might find words of different etymological origins more appropriate to describe their practices and experiences.

Value Bias This form of bias is possible when value judgments are made. A religious individual will describe religion in terms of belief in the superiority of believing over nonbelieving. Similarly, an atheist sees the world materialistically, and exhibits a value bias

when discussing God from a position of nonbelief.

Theory Bias This type of bias takes its form in the relation of theories to definitions. Behind every definition of religion is a theory about what it is or is not. Each theory would include the description of various associated religious practices. For example, a theological theory about religion might be different from theories with an anthropological or psychological basis.

Gender Bias This bias is possible in a definition of religion because religion has for so long been dominated and led by males. Therefore, descriptions of religion can and do often have a patriarchal bias. Even the term *God* seems to be male when compared to its feminine form *Goddess*.

Religion vs. Spirituality The words *religion* and *spirituality* are often used interchangeably, but each has a different connotation. The unabridged version of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language lists nine uses of *religion* and four uses of *spirituality* (1628, 1840). The primary (i.e., first) definition of each is as follows:

Religion: A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the custom of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

Spirituality: The quality or fact of existing of spirit; incorporeal; immaterial nature.

A person can be spiritually-oriented and not belong to or attend a church. Being religious implies a practice of some sort, an outward expression or action, and/or a cultural component. In contrast, spirituality tends to have the implication of a silent, inner awareness of the unseen. Some individuals might be both spiritual and religious, while others may be spiritual but not

religious. While a lengthy discussion of the term *spirituality* is beyond the purview of this paper, suffice it to say that it is not synonymous with the term *religion*.

Meaning

The fourth major aspect of a sound definition of religion is that it have meaning. The meaning of a word is the relationship between the word itself and the idea of that word (Nagel 42). Ideas and concepts seem to *surround* a word, and related concepts and related words used in language help us glean meaning from that word. If we can observe something about religion and come to a better understanding of it, then we value such an observational approach. If we can experience something personally meaningful through religion or religious practices, then we can value such an experiential approach. By observing, experiencing, and expressing concepts about religion in language, we can effectively gain meaning.

The Question of Deity

The issue of the existence of God is at the heart of any discussion of a definition of religion. Use of the term *religion* has taken on an expanded meaning to include focused lifestyles (e.g., “Exercising is his religion.”). Just because the term *religion* can be used colloquially without reference to God does not mean that it should be used without mention of God when discussing the topic. While the term religion can accurately be used in a secular sense, it should include the concept of God when the topic is studied. It would be irresponsible to leave out the issue of God in a discussion of religion. It would be just as irresponsible to leave out the issue of God in a discussion of religion as it would be to leave out the issue of monetary exchange rates in a discussion of the investment banker’s success, or the issue of the cardiovascular system in a discussion of what it takes to make the marathon runner an elite athlete.

Summary

Many fundamentalist groups maintain strong membership numbers because they “offer religion as a kind of divine psychology of living” (Hagan 15). In a complex world, people want simple answers, and fundamentalist religious establishments offer such simple, faith-based answers. But taking an analytical approach to the study of religion isn’t easy, and requires diligence. It is difficult to have a precise definition that all people can agree on. The “quest for one universal definition of religion that can be useful for all academic disciplines appears misguided” (Kessler 34). People simply use religion to refer to different things, and with sundry meanings. A hospital psychologist calming a patient before surgery, a missionary helping to rebuild a war-torn village, a theologian studying the effects of prayer, an anthropologist seeking to understand how a primitive jungle tribe views the unseen—all of these individuals want to understand religious belief, and each has a unique way to view the subject of religion.

One important reason for understanding what religion means is to help people learn to be more tolerant of others despite diverse beliefs. There are many tensions between the adherents of different religions. The Los Angeles Times reported that Pope Benedict XVI recently spoke publicly and said that it is “the case that often it is the ideological manipulation of religion, sometimes for political ends. That is the real catalyst for tension and division, and at times even violence in society.” One way to overcome difficulties between various peoples regarding religious differences is to acknowledge “that because God is beyond words and description, all these conflicting ways are at least pointing to the same reality, and that all religions are thus different languages through which people talk about God, or that they are different roads leading to the same goal” (Bowker 372). If all people can take a more open-minded approach to the discussion of religion, they will not only learn to be more tolerant and accepting of the views of

others, but they will enhance the meaning and value of their own beliefs. Exploring diversity is not only a bridge between different views; it also aids in individual understanding.

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