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Peter BEYER

Conceptions of Religion: On Distinguishing Scientific, Theological, and “Official” Meanings

Relatively recent efforts in the past decade by a variety of scholars to situate the conceptualization and study of religion more solidly in social and historical contexts have once again raised the question of whether the notion of religion is not fundamentally misleading as a scientific concept and should therefore be abandoned or at least severely circumscribed. The foundation of these critiques in, roughly speaking, sociology of knowledge approaches to religion suggests that they might well have significant implications for the basic orientations of the sociology of religion to its primary object of study. The aim of this article is to examine these more recent critiques of the concept of religion and then to outline a reorientation of the conceptualization of religion to take them into account. To this end, it suggests that the familiar distinctions between functional/substantive definitions and restrictive/expansive approaches be supplemented with a three-part typology of theological, scientific, and official conceptualizations of religion. These are derived from an analysis of the basic social-systemic structures of modern and global society.

Nombre de travaux récents s'interrogent sur la question de savoir si la notion de religion n'est pas délicate à utiliser en tant que concept scientifique. L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner ces critiques et de proposer une réorientation de la conceptualisation de la religion qui tiendrait compte de celles-ci. Aux distinctions classiques entre définitions fonctionnelle et substantive et entre approches restrictive et extensive, il suggère d'ajouter une typologie fondée sur les conceptualisations théologique, scientifique et officielle de la religion, basée sur les structures socio-systémiques de la société moderne et globale.

Crouching Tigers in the Study of Religion

In 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith first published what John Hick, in his Foreword to a more recent edition, has called “a modern classic of religious studies” (see Smith, 1991). The book does not define religion. Rather, *The Meaning and End of Religion* argues against the scholarly use of the terms “religion” and “religions”, claiming that the differentiated reification they imply makes them “confusing, unnecessary, and distorting” (p. 50). Smith is quite unequivocal: “Neither religion in general nor any one of the

religions . . . is in itself an intelligible entity, a valid object of inquiry or of concern either for the scholar or for the man of faith” (p. 12) Somewhat less extreme, 20 years later, Jonathan Z. Smith, a religious studies scholar of comparable stature, expressed similar doubts. He wrote, “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 independent existence apart from the academy” (1982: xi).

During the last decade, various scholars have added a further dimension to this style of critique. Writers such as Talal Asad (1993), Timothy Fitzgerald (1990, 1997), David Chidester (1996a, 1996b), and Russell McCutcheon (1997), to name only a few, also argue that the concept of religion is (recently) constructed and often distorting. Most of these observers, however, add that the ideas of religion and religions have ideological and political implications, that they have arisen and played important roles in the context of western imperial expansion, serving as tools of colonial projection and control. These critiques target not only the colonial administrators, missionaries, and elites who have supposedly availed themselves of these ideological devices, but also and even primarily the scholars of religion, including above all anthropologists and historians of religion. These latter are deemed to have collaborated, wittingly or not, in an overall project of conceptual and symbolic imposition. Timothy Fitzgerald offers a clear summary of this position:

The construction and dissemination of this myth of “religion” which has begotten both liberal ecumenical theology and the so-called science of religion, are now being achieved through the agency of special university departments and publishing lists. The institutional fact, which is unwittingly disguised by the presence of quite large numbers of sociologists, anthropologists, historians and so on in the same departments, itself requires anthropological or cultural analysis. It is itself a myth, an ideology of a particular kind, one that clothes itself in particular ways. It is a gentle, kind, and rather optimistic philosophy, but it hides from itself the relation between the institutions which it describes as “religious” and the exercise of power. It also tends to disguise its own relation to power, for example as an agency for mystifying the relationship between rich western countries and the post-colonial third world. And it represents itself as an objective science, the factual study of a putative human religiosity. (1997: 108)

David Chidester hits even harder when he refers to this relation between scholarship and political domination as “the entanglement of the study of religion in the violent history of European conquest and colonization” and as “the intimate relation between category formation in the study of religion and European colonial domination of ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ societies” (1996a: 141).

Controversy surrounding the meaning and implications of the idea of religion did not of course begin only with the publication of this more recent literature. Arguments along these lines are as old as the academic disciplines that have concerned themselves with the topic. To mention but two classic examples, Durkheim (1965: 37–117) defended his definition of religion against what he tried to argue were the misconceptions of others; and Weber famously refused to define religion, claiming that such a conceptualization could only flow out of particular social-scientific analysis (Weber, 1978: 399).

Ever since, the anthropology and sociology of religion, as well as religious studies, have been periodically blessed (or plagued) with ongoing discussions about definitions and conceptualizations of religion (see, as representative examples, O'Toole, 1984: 10–51; Penner, 1989; Lawson and McCauley, 1990: 12–31; Paden, 1992; Segal, 1992). Where certain of the more recent authors go significantly further is in their contention that the concept of religion is too problematic to be of much use at all; that its meaning is essentially bound up with political ends; or that at the very least its salience is to be limited to that of an ideal type. In fact, it may not be going too far to say that it represents the radical extension of Weber's point of departure. To quote the *locus classicus* in Weber: "The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action;" and, reminiscent of W.C. Smith:

... the external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experience, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior's "meaning". (Weber, 1978: 399)

That said, neither Weber's assumptions nor the trenchant analyses of the recent critiques should themselves be accepted uncritically. They also, to cite a phrase from the Fitzgerald quote above, "require anthropological or cultural analysis".

In this article, I have two related purposes. The first is to discuss the analyses of representative authors in the debate—two Smiths, McCutcheon, Chidester, Fitzgerald, and Asad—with a view to uncovering their own varied assumptions with respect to the concept of religion. What I wish to show is that their cogent unmasking of the scholarly study of religion itself masks sociologically underanalysed positions. In particular, my aim here is to demonstrate how strategies of de-legitimation on their part have the effect of dismissing certain perspectives on religion not just because they are in key respects mistaken or cognitively insufficient, but also because they are deemed "bad" or morally insufficient. The second purpose is then, on the basis of this examination, to suggest a more clearly differentiated and theoretically grounded repartition of approaches to the concept of religion, one that does not privilege one sort of conceptualization (or lack of it) over others, but rather focuses on their differences and the social sources of those differences. The strategy does not deny either the possibility of overlapping conceptualizations or the evidently contested nature of the category of religion. On the contrary, my purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of precisely the overlapping and the contestation. Accordingly, I see three sorts of approach, not just "theological" and "scientific" approaches, but also "official" meanings of religion. Each of these has its characteristic logic(s) grounded in the institutional priorities of the respective societal systems that typically generate them, namely the religious, scientific, and the confluence of the legal, political, educational, and mass media systems. Each bears a specific relation to the structures of contemporary global society and will make little or at least far less sense outside that

context. My overall aim and hope are that the analysis will supplement the efforts of many others (including those that I discuss and criticize) to generate greater clarity in the question of what counts as religion; and thereby lessen the confusion that leads to charges that others' approaches are merely ideological, lacking in reality, or, in effect, the reflection of false consciousness.

Hidden Dragons in Critiques of Religion

An important question that needs constantly to be asked when assessing the recent criticisms of the idea of religion concerns the alternatives that the various authors favour. If what they criticize is inadequate, misleading, or just plain wrong, what approach would be better? A sampling of answers shows quite a variety, but also some revealing consistencies. Both the variety and the consistencies lead one to ask whether the discussion has not thus far been entirely too dichotomous, essentially pitting only two types of observers against each other: "theologians" and "scientists". If so, we might ask, is there not an excluded "third"?

Wilfred C. Smith, to begin with the earliest of my sample scholars, is quite clear in his preference for the idea of "faith" (and, in the plural, "faiths") over the term "religion" (and "religions"). In contrast to the "reification" associated with the words religion and religions, faith is for him a highly personal and ineffable quality. Faith has two aspects which distinguish it from the problematic notions of religion and the religions. It is, in Smith's words, something that "cannot be precisely delineated and verbalized . . . something too profound, too personal, and too divine for public exposition". Faith is also something that, in its expressions, displays an "arresting diversity" (1991: 170). It thereby escapes delimitation on both ends of a continuum from singularity to infinite variation. Any clear and socially authoritative distinction as religion is as much a distortion of faith as the attempt to restrict its variable expression to a finite set of religions. Faith is a "personal and inner quality" (p. 171) that expresses itself directly in the life of individuals, mediated only by what Smith calls "cumulative traditions". The variety of faiths is therefore directly proportional to the variety of persons expressing those faiths. In favouring and styling faith in this way, however, Smith reveals implicitly what the wider problem is for him: the concepts religion and the religions are to be rejected because they valorize differentiated social institutions and authority structures rather than personal experience and personal piety. "Reification", Smith's word for the degeneration of the religious which he decries, means nothing other than the *social* differentiation of "the religious" in specific *forms* of religion and the religions.

Smith's own justifications for this stand are of two sorts: religious people themselves reject the conceptualization, or they run into difficulties using it; and the concept is of rather recent, predominantly western origin. I deal with the second one first. Without doubt, one of the most original contributions of Smith's famous book is that it offers a clear and cogent argument for

the relatively recent origins of the contemporary ideas of religion and the religions. These begin to form clearly only in the European 16th century and reach full development at the earliest in the late 19th century. This recentness is, for Smith, evidently a serious mark against them. He assumes, as do so many scholars of religion, that whatever the religious is, it is singular (thus, “faith”) and that therefore a proper conceptualization has to respond to this putative singularity. Since the ideas of differentiated religion and mutually distinguished religions are both so historically and culturally limited, they cannot but distort the wider phenomenon.

Like so many religious studies scholars of his time, Wilfred Smith also insisted that the measure of authentic observation of the religious realm was the self-perceptions of the practitioners themselves, the “insiders”. It is therefore of great significance that he finds so many elite insiders who reject the idea of religion as a differentiable and differentiated domain. Equally as telling, however, is that Smith recognizes that some insiders do accept this idea of religions, but he rejects their opinion. His attitude could in fact be described as disdainful.¹ Not all insiders, it seems, can speak with equal authority. Some, in particular those who take seriously the ideas of religion and religions, are deluded because they apparently accept reification.

What, then, becomes quite clear from Smith’s overall argument is that behind the descriptive inadequacy that this scholar sees in the concept of religion is actually a *theological* insufficiency. Differentiated religion and religions are misleading and confusing because they are at root *idoltrous*. They distract from the real “end” of religion. This end, this singularity of the religious, for Smith, is the one God; and the immense variety of expressions of faith in God is a correlate of that monotheism. The “cumulative traditions” of which he writes, which may to some readers seem like just another word for the religions, are for Smith only the aggregate of faith responses, observer’s abstractions that should not be confused with what the religious enterprise is really all about, namely a personal relation with the divine. Therefore, the problem for him is not that some people think erroneously that the religions exist, it is that they should not do so. Faith is the alternative to “religion” and this religion is bad faith; it is idolatry.

Compared to Smith’s theological critique, the work of Russell McCutcheon seems to make exactly the reverse argument. In one sense, this is indeed the case; and yet the two scholars also share some important dimensions. McCutcheon (1997) attacks what he calls the *sui generis* notion of religion. His core argument is that the academic study of religion has been dominated by a conception of religion that sees it as an autonomous and foundational domain, which must be studied primarily in its own terms. Those terms are theological in that they privilege the experience and, more importantly, the interpretations of religious insiders, those who can “reflect upon their faith” (*fides quarens intellectum*—Anselm). Their reports set the standard for what constitutes authentic understanding of religion, and thereby marginalize or even declare as illegitimate what McCutcheon favours instead, namely what he calls *naturalistic* approaches. These are, in effect, social-scientific ones that seek to explain religion as an interwoven aspect

of socio-historical contexts. As outsider perspectives, the “dominant discourse”, as he calls it, declares these to be insufficient and above all reductionistic: they deny the *sui generis* quality of religion. Moreover, argues McCutcheon, this effective removal of religion from scientific scrutiny has political implications. Declaring as secondary and even irrelevant the historical and social context in which religion occurs has the effect of blinding us to the ways religion supports dominant power relations in society. In particular, the *sui generis* discourse on religion posits an authentic essence for religion, one that the complex relations of above all contemporary society tend to cover up or disfavour. That essence of the religious is therefore clearer in simpler societies, in the “primitive”, in the past. Hence he calls the discourse the politics of nostalgia, a politics that laments the present and thereby abandons it to its injustices.

McCutcheon’s main targets in his critique are phenomenological approaches to religion such as that of Mircea Eliade, but also, to a somewhat lesser extent, Wilfred C. Smith (see, e.g. 1997: 14f., 127f.). Given what I have just summarized, Smith’s standing should not be surprising. Although Smith quite clearly shares most features of the *sui generis* approach, he is also a pointed critic of the idea of differentiated religion. For McCutcheon, *sui generis* religion and socially differentiated religion go hand in hand in falsely removing the religious from socio-political and contemporary context. In representing the one but opposing the other, Smith seems not to go far enough or even to be contradictory. If, however, one compares the motivations of the two authors, their divergent interests, as it were, then it becomes apparent that Smith’s “faith” and McCutcheon’s “naturalism” are not at all similar. The former is interested in a supernatural entity called God; its concern is theological. The latter is interested in understanding the construction of social power relations; its concern is (social-)scientific. For McCutcheon, styling religion as distinct and therefore innocent of implications in structures of domination is just as distorting of scientific reality as the idolatrous reification of religion and religions is distorting of theological reality for Smith. They overlap in agreeing that imagining religion as something differentiated and apart is problematic but the problems they see are not the same. Ultimately, therefore, their critiques are incommensurate. Yet McCutcheon’s attempt to paint the *sui generis* discourse as simply a mistaken politics of nostalgia is itself misplaced to the extent that it insists on judging theological approaches only in terms of their scientific adequacy. Moreover, even on scientific grounds alone, the fact that what has been imagined as religion is heavily implicated in its social context does not logically or empirically exclude the possibility of its differentiation: religion could be a social reality *sui generis* and one interwoven in social and historical contexts.

A similar but more extensive version of this politico-scientific critique of religion is to be found in the more recent work of David Chidester (1996a, 1996b). This author’s focus is at once more empirical and sharper in its attempt to link the modern concepts of religion and the religions to a political strategy of domination. Concentrating on colonial history in Southern Africa, Chidester shows how European imperial invaders used their Christian-centred and differentiated sense of religion first to dismiss the

local people as irreligious, superstitious, irrational, and therefore not worthy of the consideration owed to civilized peoples. This was part of their technique of conquest. Subsequently, once the Europeans were in control, they restyled or “discovered” local religious traditions as distinct religions, this as part of a policy of colonial administrative control and containment. In other words, the concept of religion was a variable tool whose use changed according to political needs, not according to consistent scientific or theological norms. The discipline of comparative religion in the academy Chidester sees as an integral part of these constructions and variable usages. As he puts it, “arguably, . . . theorizing about religion has itself been a kind of political practice. From a Southern African perspective, the mix of theory and politics has been a complex interweaving of imperial and neo-imperial interests at metropolitan centres with the violent realities of a colonial periphery” (1996a: 156).

Chidester’s analyses are in many ways quite fascinating in the way that they demonstrate the “complex interweaving” of this quote. While the uncomprehending European dismissal of indigenous religious and cultural traditions as so much savagery is not at all a new observation, the same cannot be said of the second part of his argument. In particular, Chidester shows that the tolerance usually associated with the idea of “the religions of the world” (including “native” religions), and the liberalism inherent in the idea of positively comparing religions, have themselves been implicated in political projects of conquest and control. And the Southern African situation is by no means unique in this regard. As several authors have shown, the discovery of South Asian religions, especially Hinduism, was also deeply interwoven with strategies of colonial administrative control (see e.g. Frykenberg, 1989; Dalmia and von Stietencron, 1995). That said, Chidester evidently shares with McCutcheon the notion that the broader academic community studying religion has tended to ignore or even be blind to such political involvements, again largely because it treats religion as a distinct domain, untouched in its essential identity by social context. Differentiation is again the problem.

In this light, as with McCutcheon, we must ask whether Chidester’s analysis, cogent as it is, does not also to some extent miss the mark in its criticism of other scholars of religion. If we take W.C. Smith as representative of these other scholars (and W.C. Smith’s influence in the academic study of religion is hard to overestimate), the overtly theological agenda quite clearly does not exclude the possibility of political uses of religion, but would treat them positively or negatively as incidental or supplementary to what religion or, better, “faith” is all about. The ideas of religion and the religions are for Smith distortions, just as the use of religious structures for political ends would be. Smith does not want faith reified in the social world as religion, just as Chidester and McCutcheon do not want either faith or reified religion to be declared innocent of their deep involvement in structures of power and domination. A problem arises, however, when either of these approaches seeks to eliminate or subsume the other, perhaps by declaring its rival as misleading or of secondary importance; or by relegating the theological to the status of social epiphenomenon. Behind the positions of Smith,

McCutcheon, and Chidester lurks the assumption that “religion”, difficult to grasp as it may be, problematic as the notion may be, is best studied or approached in an analytically singular way; that there must be one best way to observe it. It is this methodological and epistemological position that we must question, and that others have questioned.²

In the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, we find a radical attempt to solve this problem by shifting the question of the nature of religion entirely into the realm of the observer, in particular the scholar of religion. As quoted above, Smith denies religion any “objective” status. As he claims, “*there is no data for religion*” (1982: xi; italics in original). Accordingly, he maintains that the most important task for the observer is to be clear about what for them counts as religion and to construct their research in this light. Smith’s approach is in this sense somewhat similar to Meredith McGuire’s idea that defining religion should be a matter of research strategy, not a question of essences “out there” (McGuire, 2002: 8). Where Smith goes further is in his insistence that such analytic strategy is all that religion can be, that there is no difference between “religion” and “religious studies” (Smith, 1988). The advantage of this approach in the present context is that it allows for very different conceptualizations of religion without having to decide which, finally, is the best one. The clear disadvantage is that it cannot account for observers, especially non-academic ones, who insist that religion is something other or more than an analytic research strategy. Just as W.C. Smith has difficulty incorporating the supposedly authoritative insider who takes seriously reified religion and religions, so J.Z. Smith’s position must deny legitimacy to any and all, including judges, politicians, theologians, religious insiders and outsiders—and therefore not just scholars of religion—who treat religion as something real, important, and more or less empirically identifiable. In consequence, Wilfred Smith ridicules those who seem to contradict his position, whereas Jonathan Smith seems not even to acknowledge that they exist.³ Socially differentiated religion, constructed and historically particular as it may be, is not just problematic for these scholars, it is ultimately unreal and illusory. In comparison with the other representative scholars examined here, J.Z. Smith’s position represents a rather extreme form of scientific reductionism: religion is only what scientists, for their own scientific reasons, think it is; all else is illusion, without data.

Perhaps one of the more intriguing examinations of this issue of conceiving religion is to be found in the work of Timothy Fitzgerald (1990, 1997). This author makes an explicit distinction between theological and non-theological uses of the word “religion”, and subsumes most phenomenological approaches under the former. In this respect, his position is similar to that of McCutcheon, “*sui generis*” being replaced by “theological”. That said, Fitzgerald joins those who, somewhat like W.C. Smith, recommend that the word “religion” be abandoned altogether for non-theological observation, effectively leaving it to the theologians. This position is the opposite of that espoused by J.Z. Smith. Fitzgerald’s substitute for “religion” is “culture” or “institutionalized values” (1997: 97). Moreover, unlike either Chidester or McCutcheon, Fitzgerald is explicit about the relation between

his recommendation and the fact of religion's involvement in imperial power processes. The political complicity is, for him, a strong reason for dropping the concept as a non-theological, analytic one. He claims that "this category is now far too deeply embedded in a legitimation process with western societies" and in the ways that the west dominates the non-west "to be successfully liberated from the semantic hold of liberal ecumenical theology" (1997: 95). For Fitzgerald, the "study of religion" is fundamentally theological, and to the extent that it is applied outside the Christian west, that is, cross-culturally, it is also nothing more than the ideological face of imperial imposition, of imperial evangelization, as it were.

In light of this clear and even categorical position, one can ask of Fitzgerald a similar question to that posed above of the two Smiths: how does he relate to those who are not members of his "offending" group, but who nevertheless seem to treat the concept of religion as valid outside western liberal theological concerns? Fitzgerald gives a partial answer when he admits that religions such as Shinto, Hinduism, and Buddhism, all in modern forms, have been invented by certain non-westerners and that these regard them as something more than analytical and problematic abstractions. Yet he describes such "religions" in a rather dismissive fashion as follows: "Modernization as the superficial imitation of western institutions appears to have brought religions into existence in various non-western cultures" (1997: 99). He goes on to declare that their existence is not "evidence that there is some universally valid type of human experience being indicated by the word 'religion'" (1997: 99). Interpreting somewhat, what Fitzgerald seems to be claiming is that the construction of a plurality of religions is inauthentic and *therefore* not a warrant for the validity of the idea of religion as a universal category of human endeavour or experience. Less harshly, one could also say that he is implicitly pointing to two relatively independent issues, one concerning religions and the other about religion. This latter outcome suggests that, while the distinction between theological and non-theological approaches is a necessary one, there may be at least one other fundamental approach—the excluded "third" mentioned above—not captured by any of the distinctions which these scholars introduce. This third perspective, dismissed by Fitzgerald and W.C. Smith, ignored by J.Z. Smith, and reduced to the status of political strategy by McCutcheon and Chidester, requires more precise delineation. It is my contention that, in combination with a clear separation of the theological and the non-theological—what I have been calling scientific—this distinction may go some way to clarifying much of the controversy that is at issue here.

A final representative contributor to this debate is Talal Asad. In an article first published in 1983 (see Asad, 1993: 27–54), this author delivers an incisive critique of Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion, and in so doing demonstrates that even an expansive conceptualization like this one betrays its historical and cultural particularity. Asad's argument, however, goes beyond showing that the social-scientific category of religion is of relatively recent origin, that it may be implicated in imperial rationales, and that it may be of limited use cross-culturally. The core of his analysis is that the very impetus to observe religion as something distinct and

separable, even analytically, is historically and culturally particular. He writes, “that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993: 29). Accordingly, Asad does not suggest a replacement for the word religion, say, a notion that would do a better job of delimiting what is at issue, like faith or institutional values. Nor does he argue for a “better” approach to religion. The desire to see religion itself already limits the inquiry to the modern context which makes sense of such an impulse. In this way, Asad can be seen to present a modified version of J.Z. Smith’s position, one that is both more and less radical. On the one hand, for him there is no way of defining religion, even for analytic purposes, which allows the concept to escape its historical boundedness. On the other, Asad does not claim that religion is entirely a creature of the modern scientific observer’s imagination; there can be data for religion, but one has to be careful about the implications of seeing that data.

Perhaps even more than the other scholars I have discussed, Asad’s position brings us to a kind of impasse if we ask the question of what, then, should be done. The idea of religion makes sense in certain, although comparatively few contexts. Attempting to expand the range of those contexts through any of the strategies that the others suggest is, however, futile because it will simply repeat the same problem. Even, we might say, the idea of a “family resemblance” approach to the definition of religion such as that advocated by Clarke and Byrne (1993) will not work because it is precisely the “family” that is problematic. With Asad, we seem to be back to the position of Max Weber: generalizing about religion is neither a necessary nor an advisable strategy. What is important is to be found in the particularities of different historical contexts, and the word religion is by itself uninteresting. Yet it is in this very position that can, perhaps, move us further. For, in spite of what Asad and Weber say, they both write as if religion, as an idea, does make sense, even if in a restricted way. Our task is then to arrive at a better understanding of those restrictions so as to be able to use the concept more accurately and so as to be able to comprehend why the idea has such staying power in spite of the cogent criticisms that these and other authors deliver.

To summarize the perceived problems with the concept of religion: treating religion as a differentiated domain, as a reality *sui generis* is questionable as at best a (mistaken) modern western idea and at worst a tool of colonial domination; religion is an artifact of scholarly observation and is thus only analytically separable from the wider social context in which we observe it; assuming that matters are otherwise misconstrues all but modern western circumstances and risks distorting the scientific enterprise in favour of political and theological complicity. Cogent as these criticisms are, they take insufficient account of a critical component, one to which I have alluded periodically already. This is that the word and concept of religion in today’s world are not just important among scholars of religion, theologians, and people who are both. Rather they are used and widely understood by a great many other people: not just western colonialists, but non-westerners

and non-colonialists; not just in western languages but as corresponding words in virtually every other major language around the world. Without denying that there are important political dimensions to this fact; admitting that the word carries a wide variety of connotations and denotations for different people; and accepting that a singular and universally applicable definition of religion is neither possible nor advisable; it remains nonetheless that religion in contemporary global society seems to be an ineluctable reality at least as important and real as a number of other abstractions like culture, race, nation, and gender on the one hand, and sport, health, and art, on the other. The next section attempts to incorporate this fact into the debate by outlining a three-fold typology of conceptions of religion based on an analysis of major structural features of the society in which they occur and in which they make sense.

Global Societal Systems and Three Systemic Perspectives on Religion

As I have argued elsewhere (Beyer, 1998a, 1998b, 2001), the “reification” of religion and the religions which Wilfred C. Smith decries reflects not just changing ideas about religion, but also institutional developments, above all in western society from the 15th to the 20th centuries (as W.C. Smith discusses). Westerners, and then also a good number of non-Westerners (as Fitzgerald mentions), did not just imagine these religions. The religions received concrete social expression in the form of specific organizations, self-identified religio-social movements, and incorporation into legal and administrative structures of the states that emerged and strengthened at the same time (as Chidester demonstrates). In the process, religious authorities formed and reformed as part of these organizations, movements, and structures; elites and followers alike collaborated in the construction, attempted enforcement, and contestation of orthodoxies for these different religions and their numerous subgroupings. Two caveats, however, are of critical importance. First, by no means everything conceivably religious was incorporated or claimed by these formed religions and their representatives. Second, by no means all the religions that (scientific) observers suggested have actually become institutionally formed and differentiated religions of this sort. Some of these religions have become much more clearly formed than others, notably Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Hinduism; to a lesser extent and clarity Daoism and Shinto; and Confucianism barely at all. The by now global religious system, manifested in a more or less clearly but variably delimited set of religions, exhibits various ambiguities and is fraught with contestation of all sorts. Yet its social reality is in most ways as concrete as are the likewise differentiated domains of art, sport, and health; even if it is also significantly less powerful than the parallel systems for economy, polity, and science. I shall return to these other systems shortly.

This social reality of the religions reflects itself in academic circles as well as in the work of academics collaborating in their further construction. It is for

this reason, among others, that the trenchant critiques of religion and the (world) religions have occurred at the same time that most academics and others continue to teach, research, and act as if the critiques had never happened. It is not just for theological and political reasons that scholars continue to behave as if the religions were an evident reality; it is also because the religions have an undeniable social concreteness. Moreover, the clear implication of these religions in projects of political imposition and control is not an argument against religion and the religions; no more than is, for instance, the parallel use of mass media in such machinations an argument against their social reality.

If we accept this observation about a global religious system, that by itself does not address all the issues raised by the critics examined above. Three interrelated sorts of problem remain. First, what of those phenomena that may “look religious”, by whatever standard, but are clearly not included within the authoritative boundaries of the socially formed religions? This would include “non-modern” contexts to which observers wish to apply the term religion. Second, what is the relation between theological religious observation (whether self-identified as such or implicit as in many phenomenological approaches) and other kinds of religious observation? And, third, how can we incorporate the fact that other institutional representatives, other centres of power beside the theological and scholarly, also use the category of religion and therefore influence how theological and scientific instances use it? Analysis such as that of Chidester and McCutcheon focus primarily on the reverse relationship, the influence of theologians and scholars on others.

These questions cannot be answered on the basis of the time-honoured sociological distinction between substantive and functional, between more inclusive and more restrictive definitions. Like the difference between theological and non-theological or naturalistic approaches that informs the work of critics like McCutcheon and Fitzgerald, substantive and functional do not reach the core of the problem, or at least not enough of it. Theologians and academics are not the only ones who observe religion or even observe others observing religion. As Chidester in particular has noted, missionaries, travellers, administrators, soldiers, and political leaders also do so; as do, for that matter, at least on occasion, a great many “ordinary” people. Their comments, and not just those of the observational experts, also have a serious effect on what, socially speaking, exists for observation. Because of them, and not just because of the experts, Jonathan Z. Smith is simply wrong when he says that there is no data for religion; and Wilfred Cantwell Smith is wrong when he claims that religion and the religions are not valid objects of inquiry. They are wrong at least for modern times and for global society. Yet in not taking the consequences of this modern and largely global observation and construction of religion and religions seriously, in dismissing this dimension, they can only be baffled that such silliness ever got started in the first place.

Realizing that religion has been constructed in a peculiarly modern and more or less global form outside the purview of academic and implicitly or explicitly theological observers allows a third dimension in the conceptualization of religion to come into focus. It also permits one to distinguish

more clearly between theological and non-theological approaches and to address the issues of “religiousness” outside religions, whether in the contemporary or historical contexts. In order to accomplish this, however, I must first deal with aspects of the modern and global social context outside religion and the religions.

Differentiating religion and religions in the fashion that I have just outlined makes little sense and would not have come about historically to the extent that it has without the simultaneous differentiation of other institutional domains that manifest positively what is not religion, or perhaps more accurately, what non-religion is. And, indeed, most analysis of the development of modern society focuses on these other differentiated domains, especially the now global capitalist economy and the global system of sovereign states. So much is this the case that influential analyses like that of Marx identify capitalism and modernity and much of contemporary sociology—a discipline which arose to explain modern society—still accepts unreflectively the politically defined unit of the modern state to act as proxy for the discipline’s core concept, society. The development of religion and the religions as differentiated social units or systems has thus depended on the complementary development of other differentiated societal systems which in their own operations claim a relative independence from the tutelage of what has increasingly been reconstructed as religion. Recognizing these differentiated societal systems—including the religious system—as core socio-structural features of modern and now also global society opens the way for understanding why and how there are different ways of observing religion; and what those ways are. In addition, it permits one to account for the typical criticisms of the concept of religion that I discussed above.

A first step in this direction is to recognize that these differentiated systems are not just institutional objects that are somehow inertly “out there”. Systems are also perspectives for observation, ways of seeing. Thus to see in terms of capitalist economy is to see in terms of what can be produced and consumed, what can be owned or not owned, bought and sold, and so forth. Economically, religion can be regarded, observed, and in that sense become a commodity. Similarly, to observe from the perspective of the political system is to assess in terms of political expedience, how, for example, something is potentially useful for gaining and maintaining state power, for efficient administration and surveillance of a state’s territory and population. Politically, religion can be seen, observed, and in that sense become a tool for exercising state control. Parallel statements are possible for other such societal systems, including, following a Luhmannian catalogue of these (cf. Luhmann, 1997), health, education, sport, mass media, law, science, and, of course, religion itself.

Realizing that these various differentiated institutional systems are also perspectives for observation opens the way to a clear distinction among conceptions of religion, one based in the infrastructural context which helps to generate and make sense of these conceptions. For this purpose, I focus on six of the just listed systems: religion, science, politics, law, education, and mass media. The first two are the seat of theological and scientific conceptions respectively. The last four inform a broad third type that I will

call official conceptions.⁴ In principle, one could on this basis derive as many mutually independent conceptions of religion as there are systems, and each of the systems that contribute to the third conception could be seen to generate their own. For the sake of clarity, however, and because the purpose of the exercise is to clarify the difference between theological and scientific while also establishing the basis for the “excluded third” that I mentioned, I subsume all non-theological and non-scientific conceptions under one heading.

The further description of these three types can begin with the theological. Since we are dealing with systemic perspectives, the main rationale for theological conceptions of religion will be their religious purpose: they are self-reflective of the religious system. Their point of departure will be the socially constructed reality generated as religion and within the network of religious communication. Put simply, theological conceptions will take as their primary reference the reality and character of that “transcendent” or “spiritual” realm—however conceived and delimited, however “immanent” it is also perceived to be—to which those entities formed as religions typically refer. Such conceptions will generally be sensitive to and perhaps also impatient of outside observations of religion which do not adopt their perspective, which “reduce” religion to the observational biases of another perspective, especially another system. Theological conceptions of religion have had an important role in the discipline of religious studies (comparative religion, history of religions). The history of this discipline is peppered with disputes around insider/outsider priority, reductionism versus theological bias, and interpreting versus explaining. Much of the literature discussed in the first part of this article contributes to the latest chapter in this sort of debate, albeit in different ways. The matter is clear especially in the writings of Fitzgerald, Asad, and McCutcheon. Beside defending themselves against “outsider” observation, theological conceptions of religion will also be characterized by what they see as the other side of the religious form. Just as scientists will tend to judge other knowledge claims in terms of whether they are based on good or bad science; just as business people will judge ways of producing goods and services in terms of whether or not they make economic sense; so should we expect theologians to judge purportedly religious orientations and activities in terms of whether or not they constitute good or bad religion. The other side of religion for theological conceptions will typically be such things as idolatry, superstition, heterodoxy, heresy, or simply (religious) ignorance. W.C. Smith’s critique of religion and religions is a good representative example. His conception of religion does not permit its restriction and reduction to one social domain among others; “reifications” that attempt to do that deny the transcendent quality of the religious end—its specificity as “something too profound, too personal, and too divine for public exposition” (Smith, 1991: 170).

The main contrast of theological conceptions with ones emanating from the system for modern science is that the latter will use different criteria of validity, namely scientific or, to use McCutcheon’s word, naturalistic ones. It is in this category that all the varied definitions in the social sciences and many in religious studies fall. Their characteristic feature is that the purposes

of scientific research will determine what counts as religion. As McGuire (2002: 8) puts it, definition will be a matter of (scientific) strategy. Thus, for example, if the goal of research is to compare what seems to operate as religion in contemporary society with roughly similar structures in other societies, then an anthropological definition such as that of Clifford Geertz may well be the most appropriate; and this in spite of the fact that this definition, as Asad shows so well, is beholden to the modern (and only to some degree western) social context in which it was formulated. Such a scientific definition does not have to correspond to how the objects of observation might regard what the scientist regards as religion. Its rationale does not derive from that source. Equally, scientific conceptions need not square with the perspectives of religious insiders, that is theological observers. The difficulty in religious studies, as McCutcheon's analysis demonstrates with clarity, has been that theological rationales have been dominant in a discipline that presents itself more or less as scientific. Accordingly, such problems are far less prevalent in other disciplines that focus on religion; even though, as in the case of sociology, the study of religion has at times been somewhat marginalized for similar reasons (see Beckford, 1989: 1–17).

Distinguishing theological and scientific conceptions is, as such, not new. On the contrary, it has been perhaps the main underlying theme of most controversies surrounding the issue. At least in the more recent discussions that have been the focus of this article, however, concentration on this divide has had the effect of obscuring or underanalysing the fact that there are other types of conception which may be just as incommensurate as scientific and theological ones, and for analogous reasons. Contributors to the debates are often aware of this possibility, but they generally avoid exploring it, probably because they have no way of gaining theoretical purchase on the difference. Thus, for example, McCutcheon occasionally mentions what he calls religion as a "folk category" (1997: 11, 128, 159), but offers no clear delineation of what that means. Indeed, "popular" ideas of what religion is are notoriously varied, even more so than those put forth by theological and scientific experts. Without further theoretical tools to analyse this residual category, they amount to no more than an awareness that non-experts often use and have an understanding of the notion of religion.

An important advantage in treating contemporary institutional systems as perspectives from which to conceptualize religion is that they provide the necessary theoretical purchase on the "folk category". Not only can we thereby isolate the logic upon which certain of such categories are formed; the strategy permits one to take into account the power-dimension of knowledge production and category formation. Systems are centres of institutional and social power; they have the power to determine what counts, in this case, as religion in today's society. Accordingly, for the third, the "official" conception of religion, we can look to those systems—aside from the religious and scientific—that in their own characteristic processes have dealt with the question of religion most consequentially and most directly. These are the legal systems of various states, that is courts; the political systems of those states, namely governments; the mass media, especially news and information sources; and the educational systems of states, where religion

becomes a subject of school curricula. These four systems may work with conceptions of religion dependent on theological and scientific experts, or on each other, but they need not. In fact, as courts, constitutions, curricula, and government policies show, what counts as religion in these systems frequently seems quite arbitrary when compared with theological and scientific conceptions. This is a mark of the different criteria by which they are determined. Thus, the Chinese and Indonesian governments, for instance, only recognize five official religions and the five are different in each case. In Chinese schools Daoism counts as religion, in Taiwanese schools it does not. In the United States, Scientology is a religion, in Germany it is not.⁵ And, as Chidester's cogent analysis of the Southern African colonial situation shows (1996a, 1996b), governments may change their mind about what counts as religion for reasons of administrative and political expediency that treat the opinions of anthropologists and missionaries as a source of legitimation and not as final arbiters. This last example points to a number of additional advantages to this way of observing official conceptions.

Beside allowing some clarity about conceptions of religion that operate authoritatively outside theological and scientific circles, isolating "official" conceptions in this way separates them from the amorphous category of folk or popular notions of religion, which latter not only vary infinitely but often carry little to no authority. It also thereby gives them a relatively clear specificity in comparison with theological and scientific notions. Since much of the recent critique of the category of religion has to do with its implication in political, imperial, and colonialist projects, being able to find distinct social locations for different conceptions permits a better appreciation of how such involvement need not mean that the category is *merely* a smokescreen for political programmes. Different systems generate different conceptions, a fact that does not in any way deny the mutual influence of one on another nor the "complicity" of one with the other. Or, to state the matter from another angle, the political uses of the category of religion do not undermine the validity of scientific or theological notions any more than Hiroshima negates the truth of Einstein's famous formula or the horror of September 11 vitiates the authenticity of Islam.

Observing conceptions of religion as related to social systemic perspectives also addresses the question of the social and cultural particularity of the modern notion of religion. In the modern context, a differentiated system for religion has developed. This system operates selectively; not everything that could count as religion does so, and not everything that counts as religion does so smoothly and without controversy or resistance. Quite the contrary. Just as capitalist commodification or the surveillance activities of the state impose themselves, represent a historically particular way of doing economy and polity, and inspire resistance, so religion and the religions have likewise become particular structures that tend to impose themselves and are in turn contested. We should expect that the observation of religion, whether from the perspective of the religious system or from outside, will be influenced by this system. Yet it will not determine it in any complete way. Theological observers like W.C. Smith may recognize the differentiation of religions and yet contest this as distortion of genuine religion, which is for

him faith. In this camp one could also place all those who oppose or contrast “religion” with, for instance, “spirituality” or broader ideas like “way of life”. They are contesting the differentiated forms that religion has taken and the quasi-imperialistic pall that these forms cast on related social phenomena that, for reasons analogous to W.C. Smith, they do not wish included among the religions. Similarly, scientific observers like Asad may note the degree to which certain scientific definitions, in his case that of Geertz, are subtly dependent on how religion has been formed in this system and therefore not at all universal. Others, such as Durkheim, may argue that certain scientific definitions, in his case those that insist on the presence of gods for something to count as religion, should be rejected because they do not include Buddhism. This argument would make little sense if somehow Buddhism had not already been constructed more or less self-evidently as a religion. Finally, political observers like the Chinese government may select their list of approved religions from among those that have managed to form themselves as “world religions”, but also limit that list for reasons of political expediency. And the Indian constitution and courts may recognize that Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism are different religions, but treat them effectively as the same for legal purposes (see Beyer, forthcoming).

Finally, we can in this fashion also address more directly the reverse issue, that of the universality of religion. The different perspectives and their different rationales make it clear that, on the one hand, conceptions of religion are diverse and incapable of being reduced to a common denominator; and yet, on the other hand, any one of them can operate in a universally applicable fashion without this representing any greater degree of distortion than anything else that human societies count as knowledge. How we conceive of religion depends on the social context or purpose we have for doing this. Trying to find some unifying angle from which all these conceptions appear as differences within a larger identity may well be one of those purposes. Yet such an exercise will of necessity also be done from a particular perspective, say, a scientific or theological one. Universality is itself a kind of particularity as long as the observers are themselves speaking from particular situations. In this light, we gain greater clarity by being able to isolate the most powerful sources of such particularity than by seeking to generalize so that we can include all possible conceptions under one heading. The latter is definitely possible, but it may not be of much use.

Conclusion

Max Weber famously refused to define religion and yet managed to deliver some very persuasive analyses of the phenomenon. He was able to do this, to get away with it as it were, because most of his readers already lived in a context where religion had been formed in a particular way, and not just in his own restricted world of scientific observers. In this article, I have suggested ways of seeing that context which make sense both of Weber’s somewhat cavalier attitude and the fact that conceiving religion has also

been a source of such consistent controversy and failure to agree. My primary strategy has been to extend a discussion that has been focused on differences between what I have called theological and scientific modes of observation to include official conceptions, ones that operate authoritatively outside the immediate world of both (social) scientists and theologians or other authoritative religious voices. This in turn has depended on analysing the most powerful structures of contemporary and global society as a series of differentiated societal systems, each with its own logic, rationale, and internal structure. The series includes a differentiated system for religion (internally differentiated into religions) and one for the production of empirically based scientific knowledge. It also includes a number of others, among which the legal, political, educational, and mass media systems are the most important for the present purposes. Most of the discussion surrounding the notion of religion has taken place from the perspective of the first two, the religious and scientific. Most of the controversy stems from differences in the perspectives of these two, but also from a relative failure to recognize that the others also “deal with” religion and thereby have a significant influence on the context in which theological and scientific observation of religion takes place—just as the reverse is also evidently the case. Including the official conception, the “excluded third” in controversies between theological and scientific perspectives, shows more than two authoritative perspectives operating in contemporary society, and in particular gives theoretical purchase on how all three are constructed. This without resort to residual categories such as “folk category” or “popular” conceptions of religion.

If the typology I have presented is convincing, then we have here a way, not of unifying the diverse approaches to religion, nor of settling questions related to the inappropriate imposition of categories, but of ordering the field of conceptualizations within an analysis of the encompassing social structures in which they take place. In the field of the sociology of religion, that ordering can be particularly helpful, not only for making sense of various controversies surrounding definitions of religion, but more importantly for being able to gain a wider understanding how the idea of religion operates in the wider contemporary world beyond the rarified confines of our own observation and communication.

NOTES

¹ Thus, of the “modern Jew ... who has accepted the belief that there is somewhere something called Judaism”, Smith writes: “It is impossible to define Judaism, but the conviction that it exists and deserves his ultimate loyalty can become almost the central concern in his therefore unpatterned life.” And of many modern Muslims, he writes in the same place, “that the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to something called Islam” (1991: 126).

² See, for example Asad (1993: 27ff.) and Clarke and Byrne (1993: 3ff.). Asad does not so much explore alternatives as show the pitfalls of a singular definition

of religion. Clarke and Byrne, drawing on Wittgenstein, suggest a “family resemblance” definition, that is, one that subsumes difference without trying to reduce it to a common denominator. See the brief discussion of Asad’s position below.

³ See Smith (1988), where we read the statement, “I take it we can agree that the term ‘religion’ is not an empirical category. It is a second-order abstraction” (p. 233).

⁴ As will become clear, there is a certain overlap between the way I am using the idea of “official religion” here and the way Meredith McGuire uses it in her well-known distinction between official and non-official religion. See McGuire (2002: 97–148). There are, however, also significant differences, above all in that the above use of “official” is far more restricted and specific to the context of modern society.

⁵ For more detailed discussion of such official variations, see Beyer (forthcoming).

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