

Rocket Scientists' Guide to Religion

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1. What is Religion?

So, what is religion? You might think that answering this question would be easy. After all, in one form or another, religion has been around for thousands of years and scholars have been studying it for just as long. Yet, answering this seemingly simple question has proven more difficult than you might imagine. This definitional problem is so challenging in fact that sociological giant Max Weber declined to provide a definition of religion at all,¹ instead arguing we should simply observe and study it to see what we find. Simply observing to see what we see is good advice, but unfortunately even after centuries of examination, we have not made any significant progress in our understanding of religion. To this day, as sociologists, we have no generally adequate and agreeable definition of religion.² Those definitions that do exist, as we will see, are either wholly inadequate, arrogantly dismissive, ethnocentric, or downright racist. Our scholarly lack of understanding is a sad, collective embarrassment.³

This definitional problem has been exacerbated in recent decades as notions of what counts as religion have expanded beyond the boundaries of traditional mainstream religions like the Catholic Church or the Buddhist temple to include a “bewilderingly fuzzy” array of spiritual phenomenon like the “New Age movement, flying saucer cults, radical environmentalism, eco-feminism, human potential groups, [and] holistic therapies...Even sport, fitness and dietary practices have been claimed by some as essentially religious in nature or at least forms of spirituality very akin to religion.”⁴

So, why have scholars struggled to define and understand religion? Why the definitional difficulty? There are several reasons why scholars and lay people alike struggle to understand religion.

1 Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 1.

2 Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013); Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001); Andrew M McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions, Language Games and the ‘Essence of Religion,’” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14, no. 1 (2002): 61–83.

3 See

4 Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 13.

One reason for the difficulty is that religion, whatever it actually is, is complex. It is one of the most complicated and difficult human phenomena to wrap your head around. Despite the fact that some scholars dismiss religion as just a bunch of dumb people engaged in some collective/infantile delusion,⁵ it is very far from that. As we will see when we discuss substantive and functional definitions of religion, religion is a culturally, politically, psychologically, economically, and spiritually complex institution with an authentic core and a breathtaking depth. As Weber realized, even under the best of conditions, it is not so easy to wrap your head around this complexity.

A second reason we struggle to define religion is because we have this Occam-led desire to simplify things down to a single sound bite, a simple statement that we can deploy. For reasons that have nothing to do with the actual institution, we want our definition to be in a neat, razor trimmed package. There are lots of examples of this sound-byte like simplification and reduction throughout the scholarly corpus. Marx reduced religion to an “opiate.”⁶ Freud reduced it to an “infantile delusion.” Jung felt religion was the manifestation of the collective unconsciousness.⁷ Durkheim called religion a projection of society.⁸ Most anthropologists who approach it reduce it to a belief in spirits of some sort.⁹ Even psychological luminary William James reduced it to a single thing, a connection to something divine.¹⁰ These narrow definitions are simplifications. They focus in on a single aspect of religion. Simplification is fine when appropriate. Some things are amenable to such simplification. But this does not work for religion. Religion is too complex to reduce to a simple little sound byte. If you try, your understanding will be caricatured and confused.

5 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), <https://amzn.to/2EZqqgZ>; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Feb. 12 (New York: Mariner Books, 2006).

6 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

7 Carl G. Jung, *Psychology & Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938).

8 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

9 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (New York: Double Day, 1925).

10 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1903), <https://archive.org/details/varietiesreligi03jamegoog/page/n6/mode/2up>.

A third reason for the difficulty understanding and defining religion is simply that we, and by we I mean the predominantly white, European bodies that publish in the dominant scholarly journals are biased. We are ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and sometimes even racist. On the question of bias, few scholars take an appropriately *neutral* position on religion. Ninian Smart, whom we will look at in more detail a bit later, is one example of a scholar who does attempt to capture religion without bias.¹¹ But most people, materialists, atheists, and the faithful included, have blinders permanently attached, seeing only what they want to see about religion, only when they want to see it.

The absolute worst offender here is Richard Dawkins whose simplistic and polemical take on religion¹² should be an embarrassment to serious scholars the world over. But Dawkins does not stand alone. Faithful or not, we have all been guilty of this bias. A Catholic may only consider the positive aspects of their religion and will ignore and justify certain uncomfortable aspects (pervasive paedophilia in the church, for example) that otherwise might challenge their faithful adherence. An atheist or materialist will see only stupidity and will not consider the possibility of non-material realities or the existence and benefits of spiritual experience. A Marxist will see only an opiate. A sociologist will see only the ecclesiastical component of religion and will largely ignore religious experience. There are exceptions, of course. Some scholars, like medical doctor Larry Dossey,¹³ do consider the possibility of non-material realities, and some psychologists, like Abraham Maslow, Ervin Laszlo, Peter Russell, Stanislav Grof, William Miller, and Janet C'de Baca¹⁴ do accept the reality and benefits of spiritual experience, but these are exceptions. By and large the faithful resist critical inquiry and the materialists strictly enforce the academy's

11 Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), https://archive.org/details/worldsreligions0000smar_v9j6; Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

12 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

13 "Nonlocal Mind: A (Fairly) Brief History of the Term," *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 11, no. 2 (2015): 89–101, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2014.12.001>.

14 William R Miller and Janet C'de Baca, *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001), <https://amzn.to/2D1gYZo>; Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964); Ervin Laszlo, Stanislav Grof, and Peter Russell, *The Consciousness Revolution* (Las Vegas: Elf Rock Productions, 1999).

materialist boundaries. Because of these blinders, neither group is capable of grasping the big picture.

We might call all the bias noted above ontological bias. **Ontological Bias**¹⁵ is bias that emerges from rigid adherence to certain theological and philosophical worldviews. Are you a die-hard materialist who won't even listen to those with an opposing view? You may be ontologically biased. Are you a Christian who believes some man-God created the universe in seven days and do you refuse to consider scientific evidence to the contrary? Ontological bias! Ontological bias closes our mind to alternative explanations and the logic and evidence that might support them. A person who sees God as a white male patriarch will have a hard time listening to a Hindu who brings forward a more pantheistic vision of Consciousness. An atheist will dismiss out of hand evidence for spiritual realities and accounts of spiritual experience. Obviously, if you are not listening to other people and not accepting available evidence, you will struggle to capture the essence of religion.

Ontological bias emerges from what anthropologist Jana Bacevic calls epistemic attachment.¹⁶ **Epistemic Attachment** is the emotional, professional, and identity-level investment we make in the *objects* of our knowledge, like theories, institutions, disciplines, and worldviews. When our sense of self, our career, and our standing in a community depends on the continued existence of some object, we become unable to imagine that object's transformation, much less disappearance. Bacevic makes the point with the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Of all the philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists writing about Yugoslavia's future, none predicted the ethnic nationalism and war that would dissolve the country. Why? According to Bacevic, because, on both sides of the Cold War, scholars' professional identities depended on Yugoslavia as an object. Yugoslav scholars were the possessors of "local knowledge" of the exceptional socialist experiment; Western scholars needed Yugoslavia as proof either that

15 "Ontological Bias," *The SpiritWiki* (Avatar.GLOBAL, 2026), https://spiritwiki.lightningpath.org/Ontological_Bias.

16 Jana Bacevic, "Between Legitimation and Imagination: Epistemic Attachment, Ontological Bias, and Thinking about the Future," *Jana Bacevic*, December 18, 2017, <https://janabacevic.net/2017/12/18/between-legitimation-and-imagination-epistemic-attachment-ontological-bias-and-thinking-about-the-future/>.

market socialism could work or that markets could tame command economies. War "played no role in either of these epistemic constructs," so war was unimaginable.

Seen this way, ontological bias is what epistemic attachment looks like when it hardens into worldview. The faithful priest, the atheist, the Marxist, and the materialist sociologist described above are not simply holding different opinions about the nature of reality; they are defending sources of identity and legitimation; their minds are, accordingly, closed. This is why the blindness is so resistant to evidence. A scholar confronting evidence against a mere opinion can update the opinion; a scholar confronting evidence against an identity must either surrender the identity or dismiss the evidence, and identities do not surrender easily.

Ontological bias in the academy is compounded by other forms of bias, by ethnocentrism, Euro-centrism, and flat-out racist attempts to dismiss anything that does not originate in white, European thought as savage, puerile nonsense. To be perfectly clear, scholars have struggled to define what religion is not only because it is complex, not only because they try to simplify too much, and not only because of basic ontological bias, but because they have been trying to distinguish and elevate their own "adult, civilized white man" European institutions (e.g., monotheistic religion and science) as superior against the "savage," primitive, pre-logical, narcissistic, and infantile character of the knowledge systems of the "undeveloped people" of the so-called "inferior races."¹⁷ In other words, scientists have struggled because of the sometimes overt, sometimes covert, but always racist desire to establish boundaries between Indigenous systems of belief and Western systems of belief. They have had, in other words, a **Boundary Fetish**.¹⁸ White male scholars have worked hard to establish a hierarchical ordering of knowledge/life systems, with Indigenous systems of knowledge (Shamanism, etc.) at the bottom, Western religious systems (i.e., Catholicism, Protestantism) in the middle, and Western science at the top.

¹⁷ Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 3.

¹⁸ "Boundary Fetish," *The SpiritWiki* (Avatar.GLOBAL, 2026), https://spiritwiki.lightningpath.org/Boundary_Fetish.

The process typically starts by brutally oversimplifying Indigenous knowledge systems as all about primitive magic while glorifying Western scientific practice, as did Bronislaw Malinowski when he suggested that science is logical, open, objective, and empirical, while magic (what the “savages” did) was occult, hidden, mystical, subjective, and driven by an irrational “play of emotions upon the human organism.”¹⁹

Science is guided by reason and corrected by observation, magic, impervious to both, it lives in an atmosphere of mysticism. Science is open to all, a common good of the whole community, magic is occult, taught through mysterious initiations, handed on in a hereditary or at least in very exclusive filiation. While science is based on the conception of natural forces, magic springs from the idea of a certain mystic, impersonal power, which is believed in by most *primitive* peoples.²⁰

You don’t have to squint to see Malinowski working hard to establish his Eurocentric, white, racist boundaries. European science is wonderful while “magic” is a primitive anachronism.

As comfortable and common-sense as Malinowski’s view might appear to some, empirically speaking, Malinowski was incorrect even on his own terms. In the ancient world, “magic” was not confined to secretive priests, it was not occult, and it was not irrational. It was rational and practised by many.²¹ As Sir James Frazer, famous author of the still influential *The Golden Bough*, notes, people who used magic were very much concerned with control over nature, the natural laws of the universe, doing empirical testing, and forming “legitimate hypotheses,”²² so much so that he suggests that fundamental epistemic conceptions of magic are pretty much identical to those of modern science, that is of natural and regularized causation with a view towards practical control over nature in order to help reduce uncertainty, to increase food supply, and increase

19 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1948), 67.

20 Ibid., 3: emphasis added.

21 Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

22 Ibid., 62.

survival. Frazer casts magicians as the “direct predecessors” of our physicians, surgeons, and scientists.

Now, you might think from Frazer’s criticism that he is attempting to erase the boundary between “advanced” western science and “primitive” magic systems that Malinowski worked to inscribe, but that is not the case. Frazer isn’t erasing boundaries, he is simply inscribing his own. You may not be able to distinguish magic from science by its unreasoned, anti-empirical, occult character, but you can still find ways to distinguish it. According to Frazer, and here we see yet another European attempt to assert a boundary, the difference, the “fatal flaw” is a mistaken ontology. “The fatal flaw of magic lies not in its general assumption of a sequence of events determined by law, but in presumed misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that sequence.”²³ Whereas scientists dive deep into natural mechanisms of causation, magicians, according to Frazer, develop a *mistaken* causal association that leads them to believe in the efficacy of unseen, mystical power.

Like Malinowski, Frazer also assumes a hierarchy of knowledge with magical beliefs at the bottom, Western monotheism in the middle, and Western science at the top. According to Frazer, Western monotheisms are superior to magical systems of thought because monotheisms represent submission to a higher power, and to divine will, both of which signal, according to Frazer, an evolution of cognitive function that occurs only in those of “higher” intelligence. As he notes,

this deepening sense of religion, this more perfect submission to the divine will in all things, affects only those higher intelligences who have breadth of view enough to comprehend the vastness of the universe and the littleness of man. Small minds cannot grasp great ideas; to their narrow comprehension, their purblind vision, nothing seems really great and important but themselves. Such minds hardly rise into religion at all.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 49.

²⁴ Ibid., 59.

Frazer's classic work *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, continues to be cited in the scholarly corpus. However, his bizarre take on the superiority of Western monotheisms should be enough to call into question his objectivity and should contribute to a more careful use of his work.

Note that it is not only anthropologists who make biased and ethnocentric claims. Sociologists imprint ethnocentric views onto religious and spiritual domains as well. Auguste Comte, founding father of sociology, set out the "law of three stages" which cast the cognitive development of humans as a movement from primitive **theological** systems where "free play is given to spontaneous fictions admitting of no proof," through "superior" Western **metaphysical** systems which are "characterised by the prevalence of personified abstractions or entities" to **positive** scientific systems which are "based upon an exact view of the real facts of the case."²⁵ According to Comte, the Theological stage is further broken down into three sub-phases, the fetishistic, polytheistic, and monotheistic stages. Again, there is a hierarchy here with monotheism being "superior to polytheism and Judaism," and polytheism (Vedic belief systems, for example) being superior to "fetishistic" Indigenous systems²⁶ which for Comte are the puerile beliefs of an "infant species."²⁷

These definitions are clearly ethnocentric, even racist. The characterization of Indigenous beliefs as lacking in reason and immune from empirical verification, the use of the words "simpler," "primitive," "infant," or "brute" to describe them, and the suggestion that Western organized religion and, after that, science are superior are sweeping statements concerning the superiority of Western religion and science over Indigenous culture and knowledge systems.

These examples illustrate a fundamental problem with early definitions of religion. At best they represent an unexamined ontological bias. At worst, they are motivated by a Western, ethnocentric, racist, colonialist desire to assert the superiority of Western belief systems and

25 August Comte, *A General View of Positivism* (George Routledge and Sons, 1908; Standard Ebooks, 2026), 35, <https://standardebooks.org/ebooks/auguste-comte/a-general-view-of-positivism/j-h-bridges>.

26 Ibid., 64.

27 Ibid., chap. 3.

practices. This is obviously a big problem. This motivation may have led to a certain selective attention, to an ignoring of facts that has enabled Western thinkers to continually position Western systems as “obviously” superior. As Hamilton notes:

...the possibility that there might be a lot more to such beliefs and practices than the view which sees them as mere mistakes is suggested by the fact that magic is not relied upon by tribal peoples to produce desired results. If it were, they would never have survived. For the most part they use ordinary everyday empirical techniques. They do not expect crops to grow by magical means without planting seeds, watering, weeding, protecting from parasites, and so on. They do not, in short, mistake connections which exist in the mind for real causal connections all the time or in the course of everyday activity. Magic is either reserved for special circumstances or is an adjunct to ordinary techniques. Finally, the ethnographic evidence does not support Tylor or Frazer (or others like Marett). The simplest societies, the hunter–gatherers, are not especially animistic, as Tylor’s theories would lead us to expect. If anything, they are less animistic than many horticultural and agricultural societies. Nor do they manifest a preponderance of magic over religion as Frazer’s theories would suggest.²⁸

It is tempting to dismiss early attempts to draw boundaries around magic, religion, and science as part of a dated Eurocentric zeitgeist. However, as Hamilton notes, early characterizations have made a lasting impression and continue to be influential.²⁹ In addition, modern social scientists continue to be driven by the need to establish boundaries, borders, and hierarchies. Sociologists, for example, have asserted the “secularization thesis.” This “secularization thesis,” articulated most forcefully in the mid-twentieth century by sociologists like Peter Berger and Bryan Wilson,³⁰ suggests that religion and all its inherent

28 Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 31.

29 Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*.

30 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

irrationalities and superstitions will eventually disappear, dispelled by the advancing light of science. This thesis is in fact Comte's "law of three stages" repackaged for a postwar audience. It posits a unilinear trajectory: ancient religions occupy the primitive starting point, liberal religion the awkward middle stage, and secular modernity the advanced endpoint. Religious societies are coded as cognitively immature and developmentally arrested, while secular Western societies are positioned at the telos of human advancement—rational, autonomous, and free from the childish need for supernatural consolation.³¹

Like every other boundary we have examined, this hierarchy collapses under sustained empirical attention. The predicted global withering of religion simply failed to occur. Instead, the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries witnessed explosive religious growth across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the global resurgence of Pentecostalism, the vitality of Islam, the emergence of new religious movements in the West, and the widespread "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon in supposedly secular nations. The evidence became so overwhelming that Berger himself, one of the thesis's principal architects, eventually recanted, conceding that the world was not secularizing as predicted but was rather undergoing a "desecularization."³² Yet the boundary persists—not because it is empirically sound, but because it serves an ideological function. By framing secular modernity as the natural, advanced stage of social evolution, the thesis positions non-Western, non-secular societies as backward holdovers that history will inevitably sweep aside. It provides a developmental justification for Western economic and cultural dominance, delegitimizing Indigenous and traditional spiritual systems not through intellectual engagement but through temporal condescension: they belong to an obsolete past that the advanced world has outgrown. In this way, secularization theory functions as the boundary fetish's most refined modern expression—dressed in the neutral language of sociological prediction, but operating as a hierarchy that privileges capitalist modernity and systematically erases the spiritual alternatives that might challenge its authority.

31 This developmental subtext is examined in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005).

32 Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

The Emergence of “World Religions”

As Masuzawa³³ notes, the confident assertion that European societies and their institutions were morally and intellectually superior to everyone else—science over monotheism, monotheism over polytheism, polytheism over primitive magic—took a serious hit after World War I. It became rather difficult to claim civilizational superiority while watching European nations industrialize the slaughter of millions of their own citizens. Older hierarchical taxonomies had always put Christianity and modern European science at the apex. But after the Great War, then the next world war, and now Trump’s “religious” America, this overt triumphalism became, and remains, politically embarrassing and intellectually untenable.

The solution, according to Masuzawa, was not to abandon Eurocentrism but to *repackage* it in a way that obscured but preserved the hierarchy. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a new categorization suddenly appeared, one that is so familiar to us today that we rarely question it. Instead of obviously biased categories, scholars and educators began presenting a list of roughly ten to twelve “world religions”: Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism, usually accompanied by a residual category of “primitive” or “primal” religions.³⁴ This new framework appeared to be descriptive, neutral, and pluralistic. It seemed to say: here are the major religious traditions of the world, each with its own history, scriptures, and practices, each deserving of study on its own terms.

Masuzawa, however, argues that this was largely a cover. Beneath the pluralist language, the same hierarchical logic was preserved. The shift worked in several ways.

First, the new list quietly retained the old assumption that “real” religions are those with written scriptures, historical founders (or founder figures), and institutional hierarchies. Religions that didn’t fit this model—Indigenous traditions, orally transmitted cosmologies, local spirit

³³ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*.

³⁴ Ibid.

practices—were shunted into the residual category of “primal” or “tribal” religions, implicitly positioned as less developed.³⁵

Second, the category “world religion” itself was originally a theological term meaning the *singular* universal religion (Christianity). When it was pluralized, it allowed European Christianity to become *one among many* but, as Masuzawa notes, “first among unequals.” Christianity remained the implicit standard against which all other traditions were measured. Buddhism could be called a world religion because it was, like Christianity, allegedly universalistic and Aryan in origin. Islam’s status as a world religion was, on the other hand, hotly debated.

Third, the new taxonomy preserved the West’s claim to represent universal history. The West (Europe and its colonial offshoots) was now positioned not as the sole possessor of truth, but as the *neutral observer* capable of surveying and classifying all the world’s religions. The scholar of religion, almost always a Westerner trained in European universities, became the arbiter of what counted as a religion, which texts were “sacred,” and which traditions were “major.” This epistemic authority, the power to name, categorize, and rank, was itself a form of hegemony. As Masuzawa puts it, “the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony...but, in a way, gave it a new lease.”³⁶

In short, the invention of “world religions” allowed European thought to have its pluralist cake and eat it too. It could acknowledge the existence of other traditions without ceding the claim that Western civilization (now rebranded as “the West”) remained the vantage point from which all human history was to be understood. The hierarchy was no longer written on the surface; it was woven into the very structure of the classification system.

35 Ibid., 43–44.

36 Ibid., xi.

Conceptive Ideologists

Let us return to where we began. Why have scholars struggled for centuries to define religion? Not, I have argued, because religion is simply too complex or because we have an unfortunate tendency toward oversimplification, though both are true. The deeper reason is that many scholars have never really wanted a neutral definition. What they have wanted, consciously or not, is a *boundary*, a sharp line between superior us and inferior them. From Tylor and Frazer to Comte and Malinowski, from the secularization theorists of the mid-twentieth century to the architects of the "world religions" syllabus, the project has remained remarkably consistent.

The early anthropologists and sociologists were forthright about this. Frazer told us outright that monotheistic peoples had "higher intelligences" than those who practiced magic. Comte explained that fetishism belonged to an "infant species."³⁷ Malinowski assured us that science was open, rational, and empirical while magic was occult, mystical, and driven by emotion. All these European men were doing was drawing a boundary and saying "We are superior."

This triumphalism worked to maintain conceptual superiority for a while, but its simplistic expression became embarrassing after the moral catastrophes of the twentieth century. Instead of erasing the boundary, the boundary was repackaged into a fancy "world religions" wrapper. On its surface, this new framework seemed generous, pluralistic, and egalitarian. A dozen great traditions, each with its sacred texts, its founder figures, its noble teachings. Christianity was just one among many. What could be more fair? But as Masuzawa has shown, this was a sleight of hand. The world religions framework preserved the old hierarchy by other means. It retained the assumption that real religions are those with scriptures, a criterion that conveniently, and seemingly objectively, throws Indigenous knowledge systems into the "primal" category. It continued to debate whether Islam was truly "universal" or merely the ethnic religion of Arab Semites, a debate that could only occur within a framework that had already decided that Aryan religions (Buddhism, Christianity) were the genuine universalists. Most importantly, it positioned the Western scholar as the neutral arbiter, the one who surveys, classifies, and judges. This way,

³⁷ Ibid., chap. 3.

Westerners could not only claim to have the only true religions (the universal ones), they could also claim something more subtle, that it was the only true *vantage point*.

The boundary fetish, then, is not an accident or a relic of a less enlightened age. It is structural. It is what the academic study of religion has repeatedly been mobilized to produce. Every time we teach a world religions course that lists a dozen "major" traditions and relegates everything else to a chapter called "primal religions" or "Indigenous traditions," we are drawing a boundary. Every time we accept the secularization thesis's prediction that religion will fade away in modern societies—a prediction that has spectacularly failed—we are drawing a boundary. We are, in essence, performing an identity ritual. We are saying: *this is what we are, and this is what they are, and never the twain shall meet*.

A final caution is in order, because none of this is as innocent as we might assume. When we say that scholars like Tylor, Frazer, Comte, and Malinowski drew boundaries, it is tempting to picture them as merely men of their time, blinded by the Ontological Bias and Epistemic Attachment of the age, stumbling along in good faith. That may not be the case, however. Karl Marx called such men **Conceptive Ideologists**.³⁸ In his "The German Ideology," Marx observed that the ruling class of any epoch rules not only as the ruling material force of society but as its "ruling intellectual force" as well. This is because it controls the **Means of Mental Production**, the universities, printing presses, churches, film studios, and journals (and now social media platforms) in which a society's ideas are manufactured and distributed.

This control can be direct, as in the case of direct ownership (Elon Musk owns and controls Twitter), or indirect, as in the case of early scholars who display class alignment, echoing ideas that, whatever their empirical adequacy, happened to serve the interests of the class whose patronage, prestige, and institutional support they depended upon.³⁹ Few early scientists or social

38 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: Norton, 1978),
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>.

39 J. D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science* (London: Routledge & Sons, 1939).

scientists were themselves capitalists. They were gentlemen, clergymen, professors, and courtiers⁴⁰. But the hierarchy of knowledge systems they manufactured, Western science rational, universal, and progressive at the top; monotheism submissive and "advanced" in the middle; Indigenous knowledge emotional, occult, and primitive at the bottom, was functionally identical to the self-image of the emerging bourgeois order: rational mastery over nature, the progressive displacement of tradition, and the dismissal of communal, land-based lifeworlds as childish anachronisms standing in the way of extraction and accumulation.⁴¹ One did not need to be a member of the accumulating class to do its intellectual work; one needed only to work inside its institutions, accept its patronage, and absorb its common sense⁴² to do the sometimes nasty work of purging non-compliant concepts and ideas.

Several examples illustrate this influence and control.

Consider Sinclair Broadcasting. Sinclair is the largest owner of *local* television stations in the United States. Every day its stations air corporate-written "must-run" scripts that local anchors are *required* to read, *word for word*, presenting that as if they were local journalism. In 2018 somebody strung a few dozen of these readings together into a single video, and the result is one of the creepier things you will ever watch: dozens of different anchors, in dozens of different cities, all reciting the identical script in unison, right down to the line "this is extremely dangerous to our democracy."⁴³ If you want to see what Marx meant by the regulation of the production and distribution of ideas, watch that video. The ideas are written in a corporate office. The writers and journalists reading the scripts are conceptive ideologists. They produce and distribute ideas that the owners want them to produce and distribute.

40 Michael Hunter, *Establishing the New Science: The Experience of the Early Royal Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

41 Boris Hessen, "The Social and Economic Roots of Newton's Principia," in *Science at the Cross Roads*, ed. P. G. Werskey (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 149–212; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Robert K. Merton, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970).

42 Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, vol. Volume ONE (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

43 Deadspin, *Sinclair's Soldiers in Trump's War on Media*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fHfgU8oMS0.

Or, consider Jeff Bezos. In 2013 Bezos, creator of Amazon.com and the second-richest man on earth, bought the Washington Post,⁴⁴ a hugely influential publication. It has 2.5 million paying digital subscribers and tens of millions of monthly readers. It is the paper of record for the American political class and therefore a powerful opinion-forming institution in the capital of the world's most powerful state. Bezos bought it not through Amazon like you might expect, but through his holding company Nash Holdings. It was a personal purchase, like you'd buy a new phone. In 2025, Bezos announced that his paper's opinion section would henceforth write only opinions that he found palatable. It will publish "every day in support and defense of two pillars: personal liberties and free markets." The paper's opinion editor resigned rather than implement the shift.⁴⁵

Finally, consider the remarkable story of Humanistic Psychology. Humanistic psychology was a psychological tradition that took spiritual and peak experience seriously as a legitimate domain of human functioning and scholarly inquiry. For the most part it's dead now, but it did not decline because its claims failed. It was making remarkable progress in understanding core aspects of human experience and psychology [cite].

As David Elkins ⁴⁶ (2009) documented, Humanistic Psychology was murdered. Mainstream psychology marginalized it by **dismissing it** as unscientific crystal-healing narcissism without citing a shred of evidence, **erasing it** by reframing humanistic insights while refusing to acknowledge their source, and **minimizing and trivializing its insights**—"humanistic psychology showed us the importance of having a good relationship with the client."⁴⁷

Here is Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi's iconic and arrogantly dismissive prognostication.

44 Brian Solomon, "Billionaire Jeff Bezos Buys The Washington Post For \$250 Million, Less Than 1% Of His Net Worth," *Forbes*, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2013/08/05/jeff-bezos-buys-washington-post-for-250-million-less-than-1-of-his-net-worth/>.

45 -Laurie Kellman and Associated Press, "Washington Post Owner Jeff Bezos Says Opinion Pages Will Defend Free Market and 'Personal Liberties,'" *PBS News*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/washington-post-owner-bezos-says-opinion-pages-shift-from-broad-focus-to-will-defend-free-market-and-personal-liberties>.

46 "Why Humanistic Psychology Lost Its Power and Influence in American Psychology," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 49, no. 1 (2009): 267–91, doi:10.1177/0022167808323575.

47 *Ibid.*, 284.

Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base, and it spawned myriad therapeutic self-help movements. In some of its incarnations, it emphasized the self and encouraged a self-centeredness that played down concerns for collective well-being. Future debate will determine whether this came about because Maslow and Rogers were ahead of their time, because these flaws were inherent in their original vision, or because of overly enthusiastic followers. However, one legacy of the humanism of the 1960s is prominently displayed in any large bookstore: The 'psychology' section contains at least 10 shelves on crystal healing, aromatherapy, and reaching the inner child for every shelf of books that tries to uphold some scholarly standard.⁴⁸

This characterization was puerile at best. Greening and Bohart documented the factual problems with Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi in their published reply: the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* had run over 100 articles on peace, the Holocaust, violence reduction, and social justice, and "no articles at all on crystals or aromatherapy."⁴⁹ Seligman's response completely dismissed the criticisms,⁵⁰ and now Positive Psychology is a force.

A conceptive ideologist, then, is a producer of ideas who draws the boundaries his class needs drawn and packages them as neutral scholarly description. Whether Tylor and Frazer were conscious of their service to empire is beside the point; a conceptive ideologist need not be cynical or self-conscious to be useful. What matters is that the hierarchy they inscribed, Western science on top, Western monotheism in the middle, Indigenous spirituality at the bottom, was not a well-meaning error but an ideology with specific beneficiaries.

48 Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 7.

49 Arthur C. Bohart and Tom Greening, "Humanistic Psychology and Positive Psychology," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 1 (2001): 81, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.56.1.81.

50 Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "'Positive Psychology: An Introduction': Reply," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 1 (2001): 89–90, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.56.1.89.

Once you learn to spot the conceptive ideologist at work, you will find them everywhere, writing down Zoroastrian canon, editing the Christian Bible, designing the modern tarot, and constructing the syllabi of the very courses you are taking.

2. Defining Religion – Substantive Definitions

In the last unit we introduced you to the problems associated with defining religion. To recap, there are three. First, religion is complex, culturally, politically, psychologically, economically, and spiritually, and it stubbornly resists the sound-bite simplification scholars keep forcing on it. Second, *we* are biased. Whether we are faithful, atheist, materialist, or Marxist, we mostly look at religion through the blinders of our ontological commitments, blinders that harden into identity through epistemic attachment and make us deaf to evidence that threatens who we are. Third, and worst of all, the scholarly enterprise of defining religion has never been neutral. From Comte's law of three stages through Malinowski and Frazer to the modern textbook, scholars have drawn hierarchical boundaries between Western science, Western monotheism, and Indigenous knowledge systems, a Boundary Fetish that elevated European institutions by demeaning everybody else's, and that served the interests of empire whether the scholars knew it or not.

With all that in mind, in this chapter we are going to provide some definitions of religion. We do this not because there is a perfect single definition, after the last unit you should be suspicious of anyone who claims to have one, but because wrestling with definitions, even flawed ones, sensitizes us to what religion is and what it does. And how knows. We may be lucky. We may come up with a satisfactory definition. That will, however, take an open mind, so keep yours open and I will endeavour to do the same. With that in mind, let us begin.

Substantive Definitions

For your information, social scientists distinguish between **two types of definitions** of religion, **substantive** and **functional** definitions. *Substantive definitions focus on the content or substance of a religion while functional definitions focus on the functions that religion performs.*⁵¹ We will look substantive definitions in this chapter, and functional definitions after.

51 Inger Furseth and Pål Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006).

Substantive definitions focus on the content of a religion. Content includes things like beliefs, dogma, rituals, material things (like buildings), and even certain types of experience. Interestingly, modern scholars who offer substantive definitions also attempt to draw boundaries between indigenous and Eastern systems, western religions, and modern secular science by trying to find something or things that can separate them all. Most attempts point narrowly to assumed erroneous beliefs in *supernatural beings* or *extraordinary phenomena* (i.e., miracles) and forces. If your institution teaches a belief in those things, then it is a religion of some sort.

John Tylor, for example, suggests that religion is the substantive belief in “spiritual beings.”⁵² Similarly, Meldford Spiro notes that the defining substantive characteristic of religion is a “belief in and interaction with a sacred realm of superhuman beings.”⁵³ Wallace suggests that religion is based on supernatural beliefs about the nature of the world.⁵⁴ American sociologist Roland Robertson suggested that the content of religion is to be found in its focus on supra-empirical or transcendent reality above the normal material realities of daily life.⁵⁵

Auguste Comte, founding father of sociology, provides the classic example. For Comte, the substance of religion is its belief in supernatural agencies, gods, spirits, and divine wills whose desires and decisions explain why the world is the way it is. Religion, in his view, is essentially a primitive mode of explanation, one in which, as he puts it, “free play is given to spontaneous fictions admitting of no proof.”⁵⁶ Note the substantive criterion at work here. If your belief system explains the world by appealing to the will of supernatural beings, it is a religion. If it does not, it is something else.

Comte did not stop at a simple definition. He embedded his substantive definition inside an evolutionary schema, his famous “law of three stages,” according to which human thought, both

52 *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1903).

53 Meldford E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 96.

54 Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), vi, <https://archive.org/details/religionanthropo00wall>.

55 Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* (Blackwell, 1970).

56 Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896); Comte, *A General View of Positivism*.

in the individual and in the species, passes through three successive stages of development.⁵⁷ In the first, the **theological stage**, human beings explain phenomena as the products of supernatural forces. In the second, the **metaphysical stage**, gods and spirits are replaced by what Comte calls "personified abstractions or entities," mysterious forces and essences that do the explanatory work the gods once did. In the third, the **positive stage**, humanity abandons supernatural and metaphysical speculation altogether and arrives at science, "based upon an exact view of the real facts of the case."⁵⁸

Once Comte had his evolutionary scheme, he then subdivided the theological stage itself into three phases. At the bottom of the hierarchy sits fetishism, the attribution of life and will to material objects, which Comte assigned to Indigenous peoples and dismissed as the puerile beliefs of an "infant species."⁵⁹ Above that sits polytheism, the many-gods systems of, for example, Vedic tradition. At the top of the theological stage sits monotheism, conveniently European Christianity, which Comte ranked as superior to polytheism and even Judaism. I'm not gonna lie or hide my emotions on this one. It's disgusting, when you think about it, it's a disgusting take.

Anyway, if you are following along carefully, the structure should leap off the page. Comte's "law" is a substantive definition and a boundary fetish rolled into one. It ranks Indigenous spiritual systems at the bottom as childish fictions, places European monotheism in the middle, and enthrones Western science at the apex of human cognitive evolution. The entire schema positions European institutions as the mature endpoint of human development and everyone else's knowledge systems as infantile precursors destined to be outgrown. Keep this in mind as we move through the remaining definitions. The boundary-drawing impulse we identified in the last unit is not an unfortunate add-on to otherwise neutral scholarship. It is built into the very structure of the definitions themselves.

57 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*.

58 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*.

59 Ibid., chap. 3.

Philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, whose work profoundly shaped Marx, also built an evolutionary arc into his substantive definition, though his mechanism was very different from Comte's. For Feuerbach, the substance of religion is not really supernatural at all; it is human. Religion is what happens when human beings project their own essential nature, their reason, will, love, the infinite capacities of the species, onto an imaginary divine being and then bow down before that projection as if it were something other than themselves. As he puts it, man's "own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being."⁶⁰ The content of every religion, on this view, is alienated humanity. God is the mirror in which man unknowingly worships his own essence. "The secret of theology," Feuerbach concludes, "is anthropology."⁶¹

Feuerbach did have a developmental view, but it was not Comte's ladder. The progress of religion, he argued, is the gradual recognition as human of what earlier ages worshipped as divine: "the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognised as subjective... every advance in religion is therefore a deeper self-knowledge."⁶²

The first stage of human development is a pre-religious or "brute" stage. In this stage there is no religion, no projection, just a narcissistic focus on self. The second stage was where humanity projected itself onto a delusional spiritual world filled with spirits and natural forces. The third stage was the Western Religious stage. In this stage humanity projected itself onto a single, perfect God, the distilled essence of everything valuable, infinite love, wisdom, and power, and debased itself in proportion: "To enrich God, man [sic] must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing."⁶³ Here, projection is now total. Everything that makes humanity great has been handed over to the divine being and humanity stands emptied before its own alienated essence, which is precisely what makes the final recognition possible. The final stage was where

60 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (London: Trubner & Co., 1881), 13.

61 Ibid., 270.

62 Ibid., 13–14.

63 Ibid., 25.

humanity recognized its delusional projections and turned towards humanism.⁶⁴ According to Feuerbach, you had to go through Western monotheism to get to the final stage.

For Feuerbach, Christianity is the culmination of the religious process. It is the "absolute religion" not because it is the truest, but because in it we find total human alienation. God becomes pure, distilled humanity, infinite love, wisdom, and power, set over against a diminished, sinful human self. Precisely because the projection is most complete in Christianity, it is there that the recognition finally becomes possible. The endpoint of history, for Feuerbach, is the "open confession, that the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species."⁶⁵ Once humanity reclaims its projected essence, theology dissolves into anthropology and religion as we know it is over.

So what, exactly, is the "substance" in Feuerbach's substantive definition? What is the thing here that makes a religion a religion. Stripped to its core, it is alienated human essence. The content of religion, for Feuerbach, consists of human attributes, reason, will, love, moral perfection, personality, abstracted from the species and then contemplated as the predicates of a divine being. God is a catalogue of human excellences, nothing more. What makes something a religion, on this account, is that it takes the infinite essence of the human species as its object and mistakes that object for something supernatural. The supernatural content that Tylor, Spiro, and Wallace put at the centre of their definitions is, for Feuerbach, a misrecognition: the substance was human all along.

Emile Durkheim, a major figure in the Sociology of Religion, provided sociology with its core and still influential substantive boundary-maintaining definition when, in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he said that "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."⁶⁶ For Durkheim, the substantive boundary between religion and everything else was that

⁶⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 270.

⁶⁶ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44.

religion had “beliefs and practices” (the substance) that were all about mystical realms, sacred things, and spiritual beings.

It may not be immediately obvious that these scholarly attempts to provide substantive definitions are Eurocentric, ethnocentric, and even racist, but they are. Any staged view of the evolution of human thought that puts Western institutions (religion, science) at the top and other things (Asian systems, Indigenous systems) below is Eurocentric and ethnocentric.

There have been various criticisms of attempts to assert a boundary between religion/magic and science—based on belief in supernatural beings, supernatural forces, or a purported separation between the sacred and the profane. Not all religions believe in these forces. Buddha, for example, rejected the notion of supernatural forces and gods altogether,⁶⁷ yet Buddhism is clearly a religion.

Note that the distinction between sacred and profane might distinguish magic and religion from science, but it does not allow one to assert the advanced character of Western religious practices over the purported primitive character of Indigenous systems because both contain beliefs in supernatural beings and forces. Indigenous systems have ancestors and natural spirits, Western monotheisms have angels, devils, and God.

Durkheim “solved” this [Boundary Problem](#)⁶⁸ by suggesting religion was more social, while magic was more individualistic. Unfortunately, like other ethnocentric boundaries, Durkheim’s assertions are more wishful thinking than empirical fact. Many ancient magical and ritual practices had a social aspect and a social intent. Fishermen who used magic to help with their catch were doing so with their families and communities in mind.⁶⁹ In addition, modern magical practices like Wicca and Thelema are deeply embedded in the social fabric. Witches have covens

67 Furseth and Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*.

68 The **Boundary Problem** is the persistent scholarly problem of how to draw a defensible line, substantively, functionally, ontologically, or epistemologically, between religion and other institutions and knowledge systems, like science. https://spiritwiki.lightningpath.org/index.php/Boundary_Problem

69 Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*.

and cast spells for the good of themselves and their community.⁷⁰ Aleister Crowley, patriarch of the modern magical system known as Thelema, was embedded in esoteric and elitist social networks.

If you cannot distinguish magic from religion by its social character, how do you distinguish them? Even more to the point, can your typical white, western scholar approach religion without attempting to assert ethnocentric or Eurocentric boundaries? It is an important question. Trying to assert ethnocentric and racist boundaries inevitably leads to inadequate, caricatured, reductionist definitions that capture neither the full complexity of the institution, or the full significance of non-European belief system. Religion has been around for millennia. It is complex and embedded in human realities. Rather than trying to assert our superiority over others, perhaps we should just stop and simply observe, as Weber suggested.

The Substantive Definition of Ninian Smart

One scholar who seems to have done a stellar job of just observing is Ninian Smart. Smart identifies the substantive content of religion without needing to draw ethnocentric boundaries by simply observing what is there.⁷¹ His observations led him to identify seven substantive elements of religion,⁷² the social, ritual/practical, experiential, doctrinal/mythic, ethical/moral, institutional, and material dimensions.⁷³ To these seven we would add an eighth substantive element, that is therapeutic/healing.

70 Starhawk, *Spiral Dance, The - 20th Anniversary: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess: 20th Anniversary Edition: Starhawk* (New York: Harper One, 2011).

71 *The Phenomenon of Religion; The World's Religions*.

72 Smart included only six dimensions of religion in his original formulation Smart, *The World's Religions*.. He later added the Material dimension, bringing the total to seven Ibid..

73 Glock and Stark provide an alternative categorization, suggesting five substantive elements of religion, the experiential, ritualistic, intellectual, ideological, and ritualistic Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1965), <https://archive.org/details/religionsocietyi00gloc..> Ninian's conceptualization is, however, superior.

The Seven (Plus One) Substantive Elements of Religion

1. The Social Dimension. For Smart, the social dimension of religion refers to a) the people who make up the institution, including but not limited to the “charismatic or sacred personages” like Jesus Christ, Buddha, Muhammad and b) the actual institution of religion, which is constituted by the actions of the people involved. As Smart notes, “Every religious movement is embodied in a group of people, and that is very often rather formally organized—as Church or Sangha, or umma.”⁷⁴

Note that many of Smart’s substantive categories contain functional attributions. For example, the social/institutional dimension functions to ensure a religion continues from generation to generation. Here we will just focus on the substantive categorizations.

2. The Ritual and Practical Dimension. In addition to the social and institutional dimension, religions also have a practical and ritual dimension. This refers to the regular ritual practices, like “worship services, preaching, sacrifices, prayers, and so on” that constitute the behavioural repertoire of the religion.⁷⁵ Depending on your religion, this could mean going to Church and praying, living a reflective life in a monastery, practising Vedic Yoga for the purpose of achieving union, engaging in Zen meditative practices, and so on.

Once again, Smart offers functional attributions to go along with his substantive proclamations. According to Smart, these ritual practices *function* to facilitate the development of “spiritual awareness,” “ethical insight,” and even *connection* and “union with God.”⁷⁶

3. The Experiential Dimension. The experiential dimension of religion refers to religious/spiritual/mystical experience, something which presumably can be facilitated by certain rituals or practices (see point two above). Smart felt this substantive aspect of religion was a critical component of religion and spirituality, suggesting that these experiences were significant factors in the “...formation and development of religious traditions.” Smart was not the only one

⁷⁴ Smart, *The World’s Religions*, 19–20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

to think this. Both Rudolf Otto and psychologist William James felt that mystical experience was the very bedrock and foundation of religion itself.⁷⁷ Heriot-Maitland also notes that mystical experience constitutes the very essence of religion, “such that the origin of a given tradition can often be traced to an initial transcendent encounter, moment of revelation, salvation, or enlightenment.”⁷⁸ Abraham Maslow, famous for his study of secular-style peak experiences, concurs:

The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion ... has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer. The high religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of this original mystic experience or revelation from the lonely prophet to the mass of human beings in general.⁷⁹

Consider the visions of the ancient Prophet Zoroaster,⁸⁰ the Prophet Muhammad, the conversion of Paul, the enlightenment of Buddha, and so on. It was their experiences that were the seeds from which major global religions developed.

Note, these experiences are not confined to a “chosen” few. These experiences, which are referred to by many different names, including “numinous” experiences,⁸¹ mystical experiences, born again experiences, shamanic connection experiences, Kensho and Satori experiences (Buddhism), transcendent experiences, experiences of union with God,⁸² experiences of “cosmic”

⁷⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, 6; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917).

⁷⁸ “Mysticism and Madness: Different Aspects of the Same Human Experience?,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 3 (2008): 302, doi:10.1080/13674670701287680.

⁷⁹ Maslow, “The ‘Core-Religious’ or ‘Transcendent’ Experience,” in *The Highest State of Consciousness*, ed. John White (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 339.

⁸⁰ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge, 2001).

⁸¹ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

⁸² Grace M. Jantzen, “Mysticism and Experience,” *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989): 295–315.

consciousness,⁸³ and peak experiences,⁸⁴ are common and I would argue almost everybody has them,⁸⁵ including scholars. Indeed, more than a few scholars,⁸⁶ including quite a few empirically hard-nosed physicists,⁸⁷ have had significant and transformative mystical experiences.

Whatever you want to call them, religious, spiritual, mystical, or peak experiences, these are significant components of all major religions. Notably, they are not always left to chance. Avatars (the charismatic individuals who founded world traditions) and practitioners often provide guidance and advice on how to achieve these experiences. Speaking again to the functional components of religion, Smart notes, religions contain practices that function to facilitate the development of “spiritual awareness,” “ethical insight,” and even *connection* and “union with God.”⁸⁸

4. The Narrative or Mythic Dimension. As Smart points out, the ritual, practical, and experiential dimensions of religion are “addressed in a certain way.”⁸⁹ By this he means that ritual, practice, and religious experience are interpreted, expressed, and passed on down the generations through the narrative stories, symbols,⁹⁰ and myths of a religion. Mythic beliefs reveal the histories of the transcendental entities, the origin of things, the history of key figures (Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, certain saints, etc.), the eschatological denouement of humanity, and so

83 R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 2009), <https://archive.org/details/cosmicconsciousn01buck>; Edward Carpenter, *The Art of Creation: Essays on the Self and Its Powers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1912), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.201671>.

84 Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*.

85 Mike Sosteric, “Everybody Has a Connection Experience: Prevalence, Confusions, Interference, and Redefinition,” *Spirituality Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018), <https://www.spirituality-studies.org/dp-volume4-issue2-fall2018/files/assets/common/downloads/files/4-2-sosteric.pdf>.

86 Aghananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism* (Ross Erikson, 1982); Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*; Vine Jr. Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003); Michael Harner, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2013); Oscar Ichazo, *The Human Process of Enlightenment and Freedom* (New York: Arica Institute, 1976).

87 Ken Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists* (New York: Shambhala, 2001).

88 Smart, *The World’s Religions*, 13.

89 Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, 42.

90 Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 1–44.

on.⁹¹ Note that these narratives and myths are typically authorized by casting them as sacred texts. Sacred texts are texts taken to be provide by some higher spiritual intelligence, typically God or one of God's "special" representatives. As Smart notes, the historical veracity of these texts is beside the point and secondary to the meaning and function the myths provide for the faithful.

5. The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension. In addition to myths, religious experience is also interpreted, expressed, and authorized through religious doctrine.⁹² Doctrines themselves represent the formalized and codified cosmological, eschatological, and theological views of a particular religion. Doctrine is composed of the philosophical and intellectual statements provide by a religion's intelligentsia, typically working for a religion's elite controllers. Examples include the doctrine of the Trinity of the Catholic Church, Buddhist philosophical statements on the nature of reality and enlightenment, various doctrines of salvation that are based on specific theological views of reality, and so on.

It should be noted, underlined really, with double underlines, that doctrine is almost exclusively generated by elites. This is true, for example, of Zoroastrianism where elite high priests wrote down their version of word of mouth Zoroastrian teachings⁹³ and it is also true of Catholicism whose doctrinal book (The Bible) was selected and compiled by Emperor Constantine and his elite bishops,⁹⁴ later to be edited by Church officials.⁹⁵ This is true of Freemasonry where official dogma is written by elites like Albert Pike.⁹⁶ This is also true of the New Age movement, a movement primarily rooted in the channelled teachings of a Russian noblewoman by the name of Madame Blavatsky.⁹⁷

91 Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*.

92 Smart, *The World's Religions*, 16–17.

93 Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

94 Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Harper One, 2007).

95 Ibid.

96 Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma* (London: Global Grey Books, 1871).

97 Meera Nanda, "Madame Blavatsky's Children" 2010, https://www.academia.edu/27289493/Madame_Blavatskys_children_pdf.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that doctrine and dogma are provided by elites. As Ninian notes, when most scholars study religion, most refer to elite-generated religious doctrine for their understanding and analysis. Not only does this tend to give an unbalanced view of religion and human spirituality, but it means scholars unwittingly amplify elite dogma while overlooking grassroots actions.

Doctrine and myth/narrative are often integrated with the ritual dimension of religion, both reinforcing and being reinforced by the ritual acts. Catholic Sunday rituals like the consumption of the Eucharist (Body of Christ) reinforce Catholic doctrine concerning the purpose of Christ's incarnation, which according to Church pundits was as a sacrifice for humanity.

6. The Path - Aspirational/Ethical/Legal Dimension. The aspirational, ethical, and legal dimensions of religion⁹⁸ are the existential directions of a religion. They supply a kind of map and pointer for your life, indicating where it should be headed and how to get there.

The aspirational element sets the orientation and goal.

The ethical element specifies the things required and the path to take to get to the goal.

The legal dimensions are the aspirational elements set down and enforceable by law.

In Christianity, we are told to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The *Decalogue* (the ten commandments) species ten line-in-the-sand "thou shalt nots" that thou shalt follow, or else thou shalt not get into heaven, the goal. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Thou shalt not covet. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus blesses the poor, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and gives them a place in heaven, but it calls out the self-satisfied rich folk, saying "woe to you who are rich" and "woe to you who are well fed" and "woe to you laugh."⁹⁹ There, Jesus calls everyone to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Or consider the Buddhist **Eight Fold Path**,¹⁰⁰ set out in the famous *first* discourse of Buddha, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma,"¹⁰¹ literally the wheel of the cosmic order. The goal here is to be "released from the bonds of mara (literally death),"¹⁰² to acquire vision, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and to attain nibbāna. Nibbāna means the "blowing out" or extinguishing of greed, hatred, delusion *and* final freedom from suffering!¹⁰³ The

98 Glock and Stark call the aspirational and ethical dimensions of religion its "value orientations." What are value orientations if not stipulations on the life directions you should point yourself in. Glock and Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension*.

99 Luke 6, 24-26.

100 The path is set out in the Buddha's first sermon: "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma" (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta), in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 56:11. For a concise treatment, see Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39-56. Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39-56.

101 "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma," *Sutta Central*, June 21, 2021, <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?>; "The Noble Eightfold Path," *Sutta Central*, June 21, 2021, <https://suttacentral.net/arv19/en/anandajoti>.

102 "The Path," *Sutta Central*, June 21, 2021, <https://suttacentral.net/dhp273-289/en/buddharakkhita>.

103 "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma."

way to get their, the path you,¹⁰⁴ take is the “right” path, characterized by right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

In Islam, the goal is submission (the literal meaning of *islam*) to Allah and entry into Paradise, with the Day of Judgment as the moment of accounting. The path is laid out in the Five Pillars, the confession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), almsgiving (*zakat*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawm*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), plus the broader ethical demand of the Qur'an: "Allah commands justice, kindness, and generosity to kin; and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression" (Qur'an 16:90).⁴ Where the aspiration and ethics get written down as enforceable law, you get the *sharia*, literally the "path to the water hole," covering everything from worship to contracts to inheritance. The ideal person is the *mu'min*, the faithful one; the ideal society is the one that "enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong" (Qur'an 3:110).

Or consider Hinduism, where the map is the doctrine of *dharma*. The destination is *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Bhagavad Gita is characterized as Moksha Shastra, a scripture of liberation. It points in a direction (*moksha*), points out the path to be followed by the *sannyasin* (*definition*), and spells out the things you need to do to get there. The Gita itself names the three routes, karma yoga (the path of action, ch. 3), jnana yoga (the path of knowledge, ch. 4), and bhakti yoga (the path of devotion, 9:22, 18:65). The aspirational element is the ideal of the *sannyasin*, the renouncer who has burned away desire; the ethical element is the disciplined performance of duty (karma yoga); and the legal element is the *Dharmashastra* literature, above all the Laws of Manu, which harden dharma into actual caste law, dictating what each varna may eat, marry, and do.

In Zoroastrian, the end goal crystal clear, a paradise renewed. The soul's store of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds determines whether it may cross the Chinvat Bridge into

104 Namchak, "Noble Eightfold Path | Namchak Community," *Namchak*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.namchak.org/community/blog/the-noble-eightfold-path/>.

the House of Song or fall from its narrowing edge. History itself moves toward a final renovation of the world in which evil is destroyed and creation perfected.¹⁰⁵

Finally, Judaism. It gives us the same three-layer structure in compact form. The aspiration is captured in one line from the Holiness Code: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), the ideal person, set right after, is the one who leaves the gleanings of the field for the poor and loves the stranger as oneself (Leviticus 19:9-10, 19:34). The ethics are the 613 *mitzvot*, and the legal dimension is *halakha*, literally meaning "to go" or "to walk," translated as "the way of walking" or "the path." The halakha is the vast body of enforceable religious law derived from Torah and rabbinic interpretation that governs diet, Sabbath, and civil life.

Functionally speaking, the "path" that religions provide serve at least two functions.

The Social Function. First, ethical codes and prescribed practices, such as the Ten Commandments shared by Judaism and Christianity, the Torah's mitzvot, the Five Pillars of Islam,¹⁰⁶ and the Buddha's Eightfold Path, function to bind a community together, facilitating social cohesion and group solidarity through ethical alignment. This has been obvious to social scientists for a while. Durkheim saw this as religion's defining social role. According to him, religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."¹⁰⁷

Here, religious morality is not merely a set of private rules but the expression of a moral community and eschatological direction. To uphold the tradition's values is simultaneously to affirm membership in the group, rules of social cohesion, and successful attainment of the ultimate goal, however expressed. Even the stipulation attributed to Christ, to "love one another," functions this way: a command that appears purely personal simultaneously constitutes a

¹⁰⁵ Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

¹⁰⁶ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); F. E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁷ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44.

community ideally defined by that love and the path one must follow if one is to arrive in heaven.¹⁰⁸

In addition to the social function, the aspirational, ethical, and legal aspects that constitute the path” also provide a soteriological function, which we have already seen. **The Soteriological Function**¹⁰⁹ is basically providing “the path” to "liberation," "salvation," and even emancipation. Jesus informs his followers that he is here to proclaim good news to the poor and to the prisoners, to help the blind people see, and to set the oppressed free (Luke 4, 18). It is freedom from greed, suffering, abuse, and all the other toxicities of this world.¹¹⁰

Interestingly, according to Smart, the path, the aspirational/ethical/legal dimension of religion one of the most recognizable dimensions of religion, since (I would argue) every tradition has teachings about conduct, character, social justice, and the consequences of improper alignment.

7. The Material Dimension. The final substantive dimension of religion identified by Smart is the material dimension. This is straight forward. The material dimension of religion includes the material expressions of religious belief, like buildings, works of art, artifacts, statues, rosaries, pipes, medicine bags, and any other physical components of religion. Note that the material aspects of religion are not always physical creations of humanity. Natural features of the world, like the river Ganges in India, the Jordan in the Middle East, sacred mountains in China, the Mount of Olives, Mount Sinai, Eagle feathers, and so forth, can function as material components of a religion.¹¹¹

8. The Therapeutic/Healing Dimension. As noted above, in addition to Smart's seven substantive elements, I would add an eighth substantive element, and that is healing. Many,

108 John 13:34. See also Matt. 22:39, where Jesus joins the command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18) to the love of God as the sum of the law.

109 Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000); Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

110 Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 102.

111 Smart, *The World's Religions*.

though not all, religious and spiritual systems contain a therapeutic/healing element. Catholicism, for example, is rooted in the healing practice of Jesus Christ, who went around healing the sick and blind. The Gospels are practically a catalogue of healing interventions, he heals lepers, paralytics, the blind, the deaf, and the demon-possessed, and "the whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases" (Mark 1:33-34). Crucially, he commissions his followers to do the same: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8).² The Catholic tradition followed through: one of the seven sacraments is literally the Anointing of the Sick, prescribed in the Epistle of James — "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well" (James 5:14-15). Add to that two thousand years of shrines (Lourdes alone has documented over 70 cures the Church calls "miraculous"),¹¹² relics, exorcisms, and hospitals. The word "hospital" itself comes from the Christian hospitium. Here you have a tradition where healing is not a side hustle; it is a core practice handed down with detailed guidance.

The Buddha, likewise, was therapeutically oriented, and in a remarkably modern way. In the Simsapa (Indiant rosewood tree) Sutta, he boils the entire edifice of his substantial teachings down to the elimination of dukkha, which is the Pali word for discomfort, suffering, unpleasantness, and *stress*.

And what have I taught? 'This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress': This is what I have taught. And why have I taught these things? Because they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-This

¹¹² "Miraculous Healings," *Vivre Le Pèlerinage de Lourdes*, accessed September 17, 2026, <https://www.lourdes-france.com/en/miraculous-healings/>.

is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress. awakening, to Unbinding.

This is why I have taught them.¹¹³

Buddha's statements here would find a comfortable place in a modern medical office. Stress is bad, you should reduce it. Here, the Four Noble Truths map onto a medical diagnosis one-for-one. The disease is dukkha, stress from all the unpleasantness of life, like disease, pain, discomfort, suffering, affliction, etc.¹¹⁴ The cause (tanha, craving), the prognosis (it can end), and the prescription (the Eightfold Path).¹¹⁵ The Pali canon makes the metaphor explicit, addressing him as "the unsurpassed physician and surgeon." His guidance is intensely practical: meditation (samatha for calming the mind, vipassana for seeing things as they are), mindfulness of the body, loving-kindness (metta) practice to dissolve the hatred that worsens suffering, and the precepts as preventive medicine, don't do the things that make you sick in the first place. Where Catholicism heals by invoking a personal God who answers prayer, Buddhism heals by training you to see that the self you keep injuring was never really there.

Then there are the Indigenous traditions, where the boundary between healing and religion hardly exists at all. Many (if not all) Indigenous systems have a therapeutic element. The shaman is a healer, one who "can contact the supernatural world.... His or her ability to contact spirits and his capacity to come back from the realm of death give him the power, it is thought, not only to tell where game can be found but also to cure disease"¹¹⁶ In *The Religious Experience*, Smart writes of African healers that they are "not, by and large, evil sorcerers, but practitioners of a sort of traditional and often **psychologically effective medicine**."¹¹⁷ Indigenous North Americans have the Sweat Lodge. The guidance they offer is not a text but a technique: drumming and chanting to enter trance, sweat lodges to purge, smudging to clear, vision quests to find one's guardian spirit. In the Americas, the sacramental ingestion of plant teachers, peyote in the Native

113 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Simsapa Sutta: The Simsapa Leaves," *Access to Insight*, 2026, <https://accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.031.than.html>.

114 <https://gandhari.org/dictionary?section=ptsd>

115 Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*.

116 Ibid., 61.

117 Smart, *The Religious Experience*, 37.

American Church, ayahuasca in Amazonian traditions, psilocybin among Mesoamerican peoples is aimed at healing.¹¹⁸ Iroquois False Face societies prescribe actual herbal pharmacology alongside their masked rituals; the guidance is practical (here is the medicine, here is the ceremony) and the cosmology behind it is seamless: sickness is disharmony with the spirits, the animals, and the land, and healing is restoring that harmony.

Consider the medicine bag.¹¹⁹ The medicine bag is pan–North American.¹²⁰ It is of the most widespread Indigenous religious objects on the continent. Here are the main carriers: It is Found across the Plains and Woodlands: the Lakota/Dakota, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Cree, Comanche, and Arapaho on the Plains; the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Cherokee, and Iroquois/Haudenosaunee in the eastern Woodlands. The bag is a small pouch, traditionally worn on the person or kept in a safe place, holding items of spiritual power, sacred herbs, stones, animal teeth or claws, feathers, tobacco, and tokens received during a vision quest. It's usually made or gifted by an elder or medicine person, and it's personal in a strong sense: you don't open someone else's bag, and showing its contents casually drains its power. **The Ojibwe Midewiwin**, the "Grand Medicine Society,"¹²¹ deserves special mention because "medicine" is right in the name. Mide practitioners carry medicine pouches containing, among other things, the sacred shell (*migis*), and the society's initiations and healing ceremonies revolve around them.

118 Alvaro Estrada, *Maria Sabina: Her Life and Chants*, trans. Henry Munn (Santa Barbara, California: Ross-Erikson, 1981); Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), <https://archive.org/details/peyotehuntsacred0000myer/page/n5/mode/2up>; Sonia Lucana and John Elfers, "Sacred Medicine: Indigenous Healing and Mental Health," *The Qualitative Report* 25, no. 12 (December 1, 2020): 4482; David Cumes, "South African Indigenous Healing: How It Works," *EXPLORE* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 58–65, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2012.11.007>.

119 In Lakota terms, medicine translates to *wakan*, sacred power. The bag is less a portable pharmacy and more a portable altar: it carries healing power, protection, and a relationship with a guardian spirit. The guidance offered is carry your relationship with the spirit world on your body, not "take two of these and call me in the morning."

120 Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1982); Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964).

121 Walter James Hoffman, "The Midewiwin or 'Grand Medicine Society' of the Ojibwa," in *Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1885-'86* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891), 143–300, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbu7198586smit>.

Hinduism gave the world Ayurveda, the "science of life," codified in the Charaka Samhita, which ties bodily health directly to dharma: you are sick because you are out of alignment, so real healing is spiritual realignment, with yoga as the therapeutic technology.¹²² Islam frames the Qur'an itself as medicine: "We send down in the Qur'an that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe" (Qur'an 17:82), and the tradition of ruqyah prescribes reciting specific verses over the sick. Even the Greeks had Asclepius, whose temples were basically ancient sanatoria where the sick slept in the sanctuary hoping for a healing dream. The point for Smart's framework is this: healing sits naturally alongside his ritual and experiential dimensions — it is where worldview stops being theory and puts its hands on the patient. Some traditions pray, some meditate, some journey to the spirit world, some recite — but they all recognize the human predicament is felt most acutely in the sick body, and they all show up there.

Conclusion

To review, Smart identifies seven substantive elements of religion, the social, ritual/practical, experiential, doctrinal/mythic, ethical/moral, institutional, and material dimensions. We add an eighth, healing.

¹²² on yoga as therapeutic path, see Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* and in particular the discussion of yoga.

3. What is Religion Redux?

We started this book asking a simple question: what is religion? As we noted at the outset, social scientists struggle with this. We gave three reasons for this embarrassing state of affairs. First, religion is complex, genuinely, breathtakingly complex, and complexity resists tidy definition. Second, we have this Occam-driven desire to simplify, to compress the whole sprawling phenomenon into a single sound bite we can deploy at dinner parties. Marx reduced it to an opiate, Freud to an infantile delusion, Durkheim to a projection of society. Useful slogans, all of them, but all of them caricatures. Third, the people doing the defining are biased — predominantly white, European, ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and on their worst days, racist. Given all this, we decided to follow Max Weber's advice. Stop arguing about boundaries. Stop legislating. Just look, and see what is there.

When we looked, we found Ninian Smart's seven substantive elements — social, ritual/practical, experiential, narrative/mythic, doctrinal/philosophical, ethical/legal, and material — to which we added an eighth, the therapeutic (healing) element. Seven plus one.

Recall the problem we started with. The definitional space out there is "bewilderingly fuzzy." New Age movements, flying saucer cults, radical environmentalism, eco-feminism, human potential groups, holistic therapies, even sport, fitness, and dietary practices have been claimed as essentially religious. So the question now is obvious: does Smart's descriptive work actually help us with this fuzz, or have we just traded one muddle for another?

To answer that, we need to ask two further questions.

Question One: Do All Eight Elements Have to Be Present?

Our first question is, do all eight elements have to be present for something to count as a religion? That is a good question. If all eight elements must be present, then if we find an institution with all of them, then we have a religion. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is no. Smart was not legislating what a religion must contain. He was describing what he found

when he looked. His dimensions work less like a checklist at the border — passport? check. Plane ticket? check. Proof of onward travel? check — and more like a family resemblance, a bunch of traits that function as overlapping bundles of similarities.

The real traditions bear this out. Consider early Buddhism. The Buddha refused to waste so much as a single breath on metaphysical speculation. In the Simsapa Sutta he scoops up a handful of leaves from the forest floor and tells his monks that what he has *not* explained vastly outweighs what he has, and what he has explained amounts to exactly four things: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path towards that cessation.¹²³ No creator god, no divine pantheon, no cosmological dogma required, and yet nobody denies Buddhism is a religion.

The Quakers strip away even more. What Quakers call Silent Worship has no clergy, no sacraments, no liturgy, no creeds, no icons; the congregation simply sits in silence and waits for divine inspiration, for the “gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12, NIV), the “still small voice” of God (1 Kings 19: 12, KJ). As Robert Barclay put it in 1678, true worship “is offered in the inward and immediate moving and drawing of his own Spirit, which is neither limited to places, times, or persons.”¹²⁴ Almost no ritual apparatus, no material apparatus, and no fixed doctrine. The entire emphasis is to sit quietly in a room and wait for mystical insight.¹²⁵

Zen goes further still and makes its suspicion of scripture a defining slogan. The verse attributed to founder, Bodhidharma defines the essence of Zen which is “a special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters.”¹²⁶ Zen literature and teachings are filled with warnings against mistaking scriptures for the living truth provided by direct experience. Bodhidharma's famous encounter with Emperor Wu, where he declared that building temples and copying sutras accrued “no merit,” exemplifies this iconoclastic attitude. A religion that is officially wary of doctrines and texts is still, somehow, a religion.

123 Bhikkhu, “Simsapa Sutta: The Simsapa Leaves.”

124 Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, 1678,
<https://www.qhpress.org/texts/barclay/apology/>.

125 Marsha D. Holliday, “Silent Worship and Quaker Values,” *FCG Friends*, June 1, 2000,
<https://www.fgcquaker.org/2000/06/01/silent-worship-and-quaker-values/>.

126 Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History. Volume 1: India and China*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

Confucianism centres ethics and ritual propriety while keeping the transcendent politely at arm's length. Asked how one ought to serve the spirits, the Master replies, "You do not yet understand life — how could you understand death?" Ethics and ritual propriety, almost nothing about transcendent beings or mystical experience, yet Confucianism is recognized as a religion. Smart himself always insisted he was describing what he found, not legislating what must be — the dimensions are analytical tools, not border controls.⁵ If we made every element mandatory, we would amputate actual religions from the category they founded.

If not all the elements are required, then Smart's framework does not discriminate as well as we might hope. Sports has several of the dimensions — ritual, mythic, social — and you could argue the point, but under Smart its status would always be ambiguous. Is a playoff game a religious rite? Under a family resemblance model, maybe. The checklist alone cannot settle it.

So Smart's seven-plus-one, taken as a checklist, is not very helpful for policing the boundary. Fair enough. But there is still a possibility it might help. That brings us to the second question.

First question we ask is **"Do all eight elements have to be present for something to be a religion?"** That's a good question. The answer, for Smart, is no. Smart was not legislating what a religion must contain; he was describing what he found when he looked. The dimensions work more like a family resemblance than a checklist at the border. Passport? Check. Plane ticket? Check. Profile? Check. No single trait defines the family, but its members share overlapping bundles of similarities. Real traditions bear this out. Early Buddhism is remarkably thin on supernatural beings and divine myth, yet nobody denies it is a religion. Quaker worship is almost entirely devoid of ritual, material apparatus, and fixed doctrine, yet it is a religion. Zen is openly suspicious of scriptures and doctrines, yet it is a religion. Confucianism centres ethics and ritual

propriety while saying almost nothing about transcendent beings or mystical experience, yet is recognized as a religion. Meanwhile, as we are about to see, plenty of things nobody calls a religion, like science, check every box Smart provided.

If not all elements have to be present then Smart's definition is not very helpful. Sports has some of the dimension. Ritual aspects, mythological aspect, social aspect, but is it a religion. You could argue it, but under Smart its status would always be ambiguous.

Question Two: Are Some Elements Required?

If not all of Smart's substantive elements are required, perhaps some of them are. Are there specific elements that, when present, allow us to distinguish religion from, say, a sports event or a musical concert? Elements that pull religion into focus amidst the fuzzy blur?

Maybe. I can personally see four candidates.

Candidate One: The Social Element

All religions contain a social element. Every single one. Wherever you find a religion you find people, and wherever you find people you find organization, in-groups and out-groups, hierarchies, and potlucks.

The problem is that this candidate carries no discriminatory power whatsoever. All human institutions are social in some way. Banks have social elements — staff parties, inner circles, the branch manager's Christmas speech. Google has social elements. The Boy Scouts have social elements, and so does the lodge, and so does the temple. If "social" is the criterion, then everything humans build together qualifies, and we have defined nothing. What distinguishes the social dimension of a religion from the social dimension of a corporation? It is not shared belief in the supernatural, because, as we have seen, the Buddhist tradition does not require that. The social element is necessary for religion, but it is not sufficient, and it is not distinctive. We need to keep looking.

Candidate Two: The Experiential Dimension

Candidate two is the experiential dimension — the mystical or religious experience. And the theorists all agree this one comes close to universal. Smart, Otto, James, Maslow — all of them argue that traditions begin with somebody's experience. Somebody sees something, feels something, connects with something, and a tradition grows up around the retelling. The visions

of Muhammad, the conversion of Paul, the enlightenment of the Buddha. Strip the experience out of the origin stories and there is not much left.

But not all traditions get behind this candidate. Some are actively wary of private experience, and for intelligible reasons. Doctrinal orthopraxies — the Catholic Church in certain periods, doctrinal Buddhism in others, Confucian state ritual — treat private experience as something to be managed, tested against authority, or politely ignored. An unregulated vision is a threat to a regulated hierarchy. Mystics get canonized after they die; while they live, they get investigated.

And there is a second problem: institutions other than the religious can deal in the experiential side too. Rock concerts can provide an experience — a big one. Modern psychedelic therapies go straight there by chemical elevator. But is that a religion? I don't know. You tell me.[FN: Look up the Vox article on MAPS getting into hot water over this question — the organization got flak for effectively operating as a religion while insisting it was doing medicine.]

So the experiential dimension is close to the core of religion, but it fails as a boundary marker in both directions: some religions manage it down, and some non-religions traffic in it freely. Not distinctive enough.

Candidate Three: The Ritual/Practical Dimension

Candidate three is ritual and practice. Every tradition on the list, from the loftiest Vedanta to the simplest gathering at a sacred spring, prescribes repeatable things to do — prayers, offerings, purifications, meditations, feasts, fasts. Robert Bellah's entire evolutionary account argues that ritual even precedes myth and doctrine historically: practice came before belief, and in many traditions it remains the core that doctrine merely ornaments. Primal religions are almost nothing but ritual. Confucianism is a ritual system with ethics attached. Even iconoclastic Protestantism, having stripped the images, promptly invented new rituals — the sermon, the altar call, Sunday service itself. Humans in groups do ritual. It may be the oldest thing we do.

But once again: religion is not the only institution that has these. Sports have rituals, and lots of them. Science has its rituals and practices too — methodologies, methods, ceremonies like the Nobel Prize, the donning of the robe, the choreography of the conference keynote. If ritual is the marker, then science, sports, the military, and the Masons all sail through the gate. What distinguishes religious ritual from these? The presence of the sacred? That is the answer we are still building toward. Ritual is necessary but not distinctive. On to candidate four.

Candidate Four: The Path

The final candidate is Smart's number six — the aspirational, ethical, and legal dimensions combined, which together form a "path" toward a specific goal. Aspirations set the destination. Ethics chart the route. Laws pave and police it. Does this thing alone constitute religion?

I would argue yes — with one caveat. The aspiration needs to be sacred, and by that I simply mean "holy," or, in a more secular vein, something worthy of, and provided with, deep respect, even awe, by the vast majority of people. An institution that aims its people at something sacred, and lays out the prescriptions and proscriptions required to get there, is doing religion. An institution that merely has habits, hierarchies, and halftime shows is not.

Let us run the test cases.

Sports

Professional sports provide the first example, and a rich one. Superstitious beliefs in unseen forces are rampant — lucky socks, pregame rituals, the curse of the Bambino — alongside symbols, philosophies, and dogmas. Sports have a social and institutional dimension complete with teams, leagues, and governing bodies that behave very much like churches. They have ritual and practice: the anthem, the coin toss, the seventh-inning stretch, the pregame meal eaten at exactly the same time. They have an experiential dimension that even Durkheim would recognize — the collective effervescence of fifty thousand people moving as one body is his term, applied literally. They have narrative and myth: the comeback, the Cinderella run, the championship as redemption. They have doctrine, the philosophy of how the game is "meant to be played." They have an aspirational, ethical, and legal dimension in the rules of the game themselves — the only human institution whose moral code is enforced in real time by officials — plus codes of sportsmanship and banned-substance commandments. They have a material dimension: stadiums built like cathedrals, jerseys worn like relics, trophies kissed like icons. They even have a therapeutic dimension: the injured athlete's rehab as a ritualized death-and-restoration, and the well-documented salve sport provides to communities in grief. And they have sacred and charismatic figures — Billie Jean King, Danica Patrick, Tom Brady, Wayne Gretzky, Babe Ruth — whom the American media machine happily turned into representatives of American exceptionalism and Christian myth.[FN]

But do they have a sacred aspiration? No. Sports aspire to win, and winning, whatever else it is, is not sacred. It is not holy, it is not treated with awe by the vast majority of people, and nobody — not even the most devout season-ticket holder — thinks that winning is the sort of thing a

human life should be organized around in the way a religion organizes a life around the sacred. So sports is not a religion. Easy.

Musical Concerts

What about musical concerts? Are they religions? Maybe — let's look. Going to a concert is an experience, and it may even be a mystical experience [FN: connection experience citation]. But do concerts have aspirational elements? Heavy metal uses Christian symbols and references, and is sharply critical of religion and its hypocrisies — but there is little evidence it aspires anywhere [check]. It locates children in a concert venue and gives them an outlet where they can bang their heads against their frustration. Catharsis, yes. Path, no.

And Taylor Swift? She may come close — her fandom certainly behaves like a movement — but examine the content and the thesis of the work is mostly relationships. Love, loss, betrayal, recovery. That is the human condition, and good on her for singing it, but it is mundane. It is not sacred. It does not aim its people at anything holy. So, not a religion.

Hollywood

What about Hollywood? This one is a genuine gray area. Most of the time, film and television have no aspiration beyond entertainment and profit. But not always. Consider the Star Wars franchise, which definitely has aspirational elements — Jedi knights, discipline, control of "the Force," the seduction and redemption arc — and Lucas has admitted openly that he tried to incorporate religious beliefs. As we noted earlier, the high priest of Hollywood, George Lucas, a Methodist, consciously set out to embed religious narrative in his "secular" science fiction portrayals. He had religious intention.[FN: See the full transcript of the Lucas interview in the SpiritWiki, spiritwiki.lightningpath.org/George_Lucas]

Run the checklist. Social dimension? Star Wars has one of the largest, most formally organized fandoms on earth, complete with hierarchies, titles, and gatherings that function like pilgrimages. Ritual dimension? Opening-night pilgrimages in costume, the rote recitation of lines, "May the Fourth" as a feast day, candlelight vigils for fallen characters. Experiential dimension? Ask anyone who sat in a dark theatre in 1977 when that Star Destroyer rumbled overhead. That was an awe experience, full stop. Narrative/mythic dimension? That was the entire design. Joseph Campbell's monomyth — the hero's journey, call to adventure, ordeal, apotheosis, return — is the franchise's skeleton. Doctrinal dimension? The Jedi Code reads like catechism: "There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity." Aspirational, ethical, and legal dimensions? The light side and the dark side are a

complete moral map, with the Jedi as the ideal persons and the fallen Jedi as cautionary doctrine about improper alignment. Material dimension? Lightsabers, helmets, robes, and a theme park that functions as a pilgrimage site. Therapeutic dimension? Fans routinely describe the saga as something that got them through grief, illness, and depression, and the narrative itself is a redemption story — even Vader is healed and restored at the end.

On the sacred aspiration criterion, Star Wars flirts with the line. The Force is treated with something like awe. The Jedi aspiration — serenity, discipline, service — is treated with something like reverence, at least by the text itself. I would not call it a religion, but I cannot call it nothing, and that is precisely the point: Smart's elements bring it into focus, even if they do not settle the question.

Science

Which brings us to the hard case. What about science? Does the path criterion allow us to eliminate science as a religion?

No.

Science definitely checks all the boxes. It has a social and institutional dimension complete with charismatic and sacred personages like Darwin and Galileo. Try publishing a paper that contradicts either in the wrong department and see how far you get. It has a ritual and practical dimension, found in its graduation and award ceremonies, the donning of the robe, the conferral of degrees, the choreography of the peer-reviewed publication itself. It has a narrative dimension that situates the whole enterprise in an Enlightenment story — science as linear advancement over previous ontological and epistemic systems, a salvation history with a before (darkness, superstition) and an after (light, progress) that maps almost perfectly onto Comte's three stages. It definitely has a philosophical dimension, expressed in codified cosmological, philosophical, and intellectual statements by scientific intelligentsia. It has ethical and legal dimensions and value orientations. Peer review is a strict code of conduct with real sanctions. It has a material dimension found in university buildings, laboratories, and the humble overhead projector. It even has an experiential dimension, found in the mystical musings of physicists¹²⁷, in the awestruck

127 Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists*.

wonder of Einstein reflecting on "the old one," and in the fact that scientists sometimes make their discoveries through intuitive "enlightenment" experiences — Kekulé's dream of the benzene ring, Darwin's innumerable "little illuminations." [FN]

And the aspiration? It definitely has that, and a sacred one. Science aspires to the truth. The entire edifice, theories, methodology, methods, peer review, is arranged to aim people at the truth. I think the vast majority of people, from every culture, gender, and political background would agree that truth is sacred. Truth is something holy, something worthy of deep respect, something we should all aspire to and organize ourselves around.

So is science a religion? At this point, it still gets the maybe check mark.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? The seven-plus-one does help clear things up. It lets us reject certain things with confidence — rock concerts, sports franchises — because they lack a sacred aspiration, the one element that does the discriminating work. It does not let us reject Hollywood or science, but it brings them into much clearer focus, which, regardless of where they eventually land, helps us sort the question honestly instead of resorting to the boundary fetish.

And at this point, we are ready to offer a definition.

Religion is an institution that provides an aspirational Path, along with the associated prescriptions and proscriptions required to get there.

Note what this definition does. It puts science in. It makes science a religion — an institution aimed at a sacred aspiration (truth), complete with the rituals, hierarchies, narratives, and codes that get you there. That might make some people uncomfortable. But oh well. The definition says what the evidence says, and the evidence says that humans build religions whenever they decide something is sacred enough to organize a life around. The more interesting question is not whether science is a religion, but whether it is a good one — and that is a question for later in the book.

3. Defining Religion - Functional Definitions

Defining religion using Smart's definition does seem like a way forward. Substantive definition that an institution is a religion if it provides a sacred path. "bewilderingly fuzzy" That eliminates every other institution from the running except science, which arguably has aspirational pathways. Still problem is alot more manageable than it was. Cacophony of institutions reduced to a couple. Are we done then? no. Still like to see. Before that let's look at functional definitions

But recall that modern scholars provide two types of definitions, substantive and functional. Substantive definitions of religion define religion by its various elements. Functional definitions of religion define religion by what it does, like providing social solidarity or meeting certain needs. Do modern functional definitions also oversimplify? Do they also import ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and racist bias?

As with substantive definitions, there have been various attempts to provide functional definitions of religion. As we might expect, these attempts usually revolve around efforts to create boundaries that distinguish magic from religion from science by suggesting, for example, that magic and religion function at emotional, psychological, and primitive levels, meeting emotional and psychological *needs*, while science is a more mature, rational sort of endeavour. Malinowski, for example, suggests magic and religion have practical, cathartic, psychological, emotional, and social functions. One of magic's functions was to help its practitioners achieve ends or *meet needs*. If people needed food, magical rituals could help them gain a successful catch on the open ocean. Religion itself could also meet certain emotional needs and mental needs,¹²⁸ by helping people deal with the "stresses and strains of life, and the necessity of facing heavy odds"¹²⁹ by providing solace against the "centrifugal forces of fear, dismay,

¹²⁸ Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays*, 5.

¹²⁹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Foundations of Faith and Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 59–60.

demoralization” caused by death,¹³⁰ or by providing for security, safety, and the necessary “practical co-operation” of a cohesive group.¹³¹

Psychologist Sigmund Freud weighed in on the functional characteristics of religion, associating religion with psychological needs and processes. For Freud, religion was all about wish fulfillment, the need for meaning, and infantile regression. Linking his conceptualization of religion to Tylor,¹³² Freud provided a substantive demarcation by suggesting the primary substantive characteristic of all religions is the “doctrine of souls” or the “doctrine of spiritual beings.”¹³³ Noting the irrationality of these beliefs, Freud goes on to suggest that humans believe in souls and spiritual beings for emotional reasons, because these beliefs help resolve the “problem of death,”¹³⁴ because they help humans alleviate the anxieties, uncertainties, and vagaries of their existence,¹³⁵ and because spiritual beliefs help them deal with the pains and injustices of human society. According to Freud, “it can clearly be seen that the possession of these ideas protects him in two directions-against the dangers of nature and Fate, and against the injuries that threaten him from human society itself.”¹³⁶

There is nothing particularly horrible about the functional definitions provided by Malinowski or Freud. Indigenous spirituality like modern religion, likely does have these functions and magic and religion likely do fulfill emotional, psychological needs, and practical needs. The ethnocentric boundary comes in the staged view of religious evolution when Freud and others cast human society as passing from an inferior, immature, narcissistic animistic stage, through a more adolescent religious stage, finally ending in a mature scientific stage. We see the assertion of ethnocentric boundaries clearly when Freud compares Indigenous populations to narcissistic children who are stuck believing in the “power of wishes,” who mistakenly give causal primacy to thought over material reality,¹³⁷ whose thought is “still to a great extent

130 Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays*, 35.

131 Ibid., 5.

132 Tylor, *Primitive Culture*.

133 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1913), 88.

134 Ibid., 89.

135 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*.

136 Ibid., 18.

137 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 99.

sexualized,”¹³⁸ and who then appear to suffer from a primitive over-reliance on associations,¹³⁹ and whose actions he likens to something akin to “children's play.”¹⁴⁰ His ethnocentric, even racist, views are clear; Indigenous people are irrational, infantile narcissists and medieval Christians are like small children in need of parental attention. For Freud, the modern, atheist, European middle classes were the mature group of the bunch.

The animistic phase would correspond to narcissism both chronologically and in its content; the religious phase would correspond to the stage of object-choice of which the characteristic is a child's attachment to his parents; while the scientific phase would have an exact counterpart in the stage at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to the external world for the object of his desires.¹⁴¹

When exposed to the light of day, it is easy to reject Freud's theoretical musings as a by-now dated outgrowth of Eurocentric racism; however, his views and the boundaries he provided continue to be influential, though in slightly toned-down form. Spiro, for example, argued that childhood experiences and their navigation of the psychosexual stages disposed them to certain beliefs, like the belief in powerful benevolent or malevolent beings. Spiro thought that the roots of “compulsive ritual” were to be found in the degree to which the “oral drive” had been satisfied. The ethnocentric boundaries also appear in his stipulation that the source of religion is “infantile and primitive fears”¹⁴² which overwhelm children and drive Indigenous religions, particularly when no better alternatives, like science and technology, exist. Spiro's thoughts about “better alternatives” is important. Religion meets cognitive needs for understanding, but only better alternatives, i.e. science and technology, do not exist.¹⁴³ As Spiro notes, “...if

138 Ibid., 105.

139 Ibid., 96.

140 Ibid., 1913.

141 Ibid., 104.

142 Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” 115.

143 Melford E. Spiro and Roy G. D'Andrade, “A Cross-Cultural Study of Some Supernatural Beliefs,” *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 3 (June 1, 1958): 456.

substantive desires are satisfied by technology; or if expressive desires are satisfied by politics or art or magic, religion should, by that extent, be less important for their satisfaction.”¹⁴⁴

Religion does function to meet needs, that is for certain, but not just cognitive or emotional needs for security. Religion services existential needs as well. Yinger suggests ‘religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations...Thus religions are built to carry the ‘peak load’ of human emotional need.’¹⁴⁵ Wallace, argues supernatural beliefs in God persist because they are an “important part of one or more processes by which major human wants are gratified.”¹⁴⁶

As we have seen, Emile Durkheim provides a substantive definition of religion, but he also provides a functional definition. Earlier, I provided only half of his definition. “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices....”¹⁴⁷ The full quote is “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which *unite into one single moral community called a Church*, all those who adhere to them.” As you can see, the second part of Durkheim’s definition is functional. According to him, religion’s function is to unite people into a single moral community.¹⁴⁸ Religion thus has a social function and perhaps a political function as well. Religion acts as a social glue that brings people together.

Functional definitions are typically not too popular amongst scholars. Why? Because they are even worse than substantive definitions at facilitating clear boundaries. As Scharf¹⁴⁹ notes, they are simply too broad and inclusive. “If religion is defined as that which promotes unity or social

144 Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” 116.

145 J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London: Macmillan Company, 1970), 7, <https://archive.org/details/scientificstudy01970ying>.

146 Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View*, vi.

147 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44.

148 Furseth and Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 19.

149 *The Sociological Study of Religion* (London: Hutchinson, 1970).

cohesion, then anything which does this is religion,”¹⁵⁰ If you are not careful, everything from communism through fascism through nationalism, capitalism, sports, and rock concerts become religious events. Because functional definitions do not provide for strong boundaries, Hamilton suggests we avoid functional definitions altogether.¹⁵¹ This rejection seems unwise, however. Religion, like all human institutions, is functional. It is there for a reason; otherwise, it would not exist. If we ignore the functions of religion, we might as well not bother studying it at all.

So what do we do? How do we deal with the boundary problem in relation to function definition of religion. We do the same thing we did with substantive definitions. We identify the overt and covert biases and then take an open, non-ethnocentric look at the functional aspects of religion to see what we find.

To understand the functions of religion in a comprehensive fashion, we need to take a step back to consider what exactly religion is at root, and what it is is an institution. First and foremost, “religion is an institution created by people”.¹⁵² Seems simple enough. But what does that mean? First, we start with the idea of an institution. An institution is simply an organized set of rules and procedures, norms and values that exists over and above the individual. Think of the university. The university has a set of rules (read your text book, study diligently, don’t cheat on exams), procedures (when and where to write exams, how to get your marks), norms and values (education and honesty are good, cheating and plagiarism are bad) that *function* to facilitate a post-secondary education experience.

Institutions are an essential part of human society, and they are always functional. What is the function of an institution? This is not rocket science. As Spiro states, institutions are *always* set up to meet some kind of human need: “...all institutions ... are instrumental means for the satisfaction of needs.”¹⁵³ Education institutions meet educational needs. Retail institutions meet the retail needs of producers. Agricultural institutions meet agricultural needs of farmers, and so

150 Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 19.

151 *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*.

152 Abby Day, *Sociology of Religion: Overview and Analysis of Contemporary Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3.

153 “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” 96.

on and so forth. As an institution, religions also meet needs. The question is, what human needs does religion meet.

The Circle of Seven Essential Needs

To answer that question, we need to first know what sorts of needs humans have. To do that, we turn to the *Circle of Seven Essential Needs*.¹⁵⁴ This circle, which is inspired by the work of Abraham Maslow as well as the philosophical and spiritual beliefs of Indigenous peoples, proposes that humans have seven essential needs, an outer layer of basic needs and two inner needs. These needs include

1. **Physiological Needs**, which are our needs for food, water, air, clothing, exercise, sleep, freedom from pain.
2. **Emotional Needs**, which are our needs for unconditional support, acceptance, and inclusion. We all have a need to feel we are wanted and connected to something. We all need to feel that we belong.
3. **Cognitive Needs**, which are our needs to know and understand the world, the need to be in touch with reality. These cognitive needs were identified by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 article on the “hierarchy” of human needs.¹⁵⁵ In that article, Maslow defined our cognitive needs as comprising two sub-needs, the need to know and the need to understand. Maslow defined the *need to know* as the need to “be aware of reality, to get the facts, to satisfy curiosity...to see rather than to be blind.”¹⁵⁶ Maslow defined the *need to understand* as the need to understand the reality that we came to know. According to Maslow, it was not enough just to know things, to accumulate mere facts. As he said, “... the facts that we acquire, if they are isolated or atomistic, *inevitably* get theorized about,

154 Mike Sosteric and Gina Ratkovic, “It Takes a Village: Advancing Attachment Theory and Recovering the Roots of Human Health with the Seven Essential Needs,” Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 2022, <https://www.academia.edu/61410417/>.

155 Abraham H. Maslow, “Preface to Motivation Theory,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 5, no. 1 (1943): 85–92, doi:10.1097/00006842-194301000-00012.

156 Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 385, doi:10.1037/h0054346.

and either analyzed or organized or both.”¹⁵⁷ Maslow felt the need to know and understand were driving needs. As he said, “even after we know, we are impelled to know more and more minutely and microscopically on the one hand, and on the other, more and more extensively in the direction of a world philosophy, religion, etc.”¹⁵⁸

4. **Psychological Needs**, which are our needs to feel good about ourselves, to feel *powerful* and efficacious, to have high self-esteem, to have faith in ourselves, and to successfully manifest our will in creation; to create the world we want.

5. **Environmental Needs**, which are our needs for safe, secure, nurturing, and aesthetically pleasing environments. Environmental needs also include the need for safe environments, safe spaces, and stable and secure finances. Safety includes the absence of assault of any kind, including physical assault (e.g., spanking), emotional assault, and psychological assault. Stability includes the emotional consistency of stable parental/guardian relationships as well as financial stability. Financial stability includes resources sufficient to remove the anxieties and uncertainties of survival.

6. **Alignment needs** include a need for *inner alignment* and a need for *outer alignment*. *Inner alignment* is our need for alignment with our inner self or being, self-actualization in Maslow’s terms.¹⁵⁹ Alignment with our inner self means we are in-sync with our inner self, our “essential biologically based inner nature....”¹⁶⁰ It is “...the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him [sic] to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.”¹⁶¹ Self-actualization means actualizing your talents and inner being. If we have a talent and desire to be a musician, then we practice and play. If we have a drive to be a healer of some sort, then

157 Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation.”

158 Ibid., 385.

159 Abraham. H. Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being (2nd Edition)* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1968).

160 Ibid., 3.

161 Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 382.

we honour that and work towards manifesting this desire. If we are drawn to STEM sciences, or a particular gender, then align with these inner drives.

Outer alignment is our need for ethical, behavioural, conceptual alignment with groups (outside our self), like our family, community, work, and national organizations. To be aligned with a group means you adopt the norms, values, folkways, and worldviews of this group. You can be aligned with the worldviews and traditions of your family. Outer alignment can also mean alignment with our traditions and our ancestors, the natural world, and our land base.

7. **Connection Needs.** Alignment is a functional need of humans not only because alignment facilitates biological survival (humans need groups to survive) but also because alignment facilitates outer and inner connection. **Outer connection** is connection with family, friends, community, our nation, and so on. There is an obvious survival advantage to connection even in modern societies. As the adage says, “It is not what you know, it is who you know.” Connections with family and groups facilitate survival in modern life. Being aligned with your community obviously facilitates this connection. It is easier to be included in and connected with groups when you align yourself with that group.

Outer connection is only one-half of the need for connection. Inner connection is a need for connection to our inner Self, our Higher Self, our ancestors, and the Divine inside us. Inner connection translates into Ninian Smart’s experiential category and is to be understood as mystical, shamanic experience, transcendent, or peak and nature experiences. These mystical or transcendent experiences of connection, which are something accepted as simple fact in Indigenous spiritual systems,¹⁶² include experiences of connection to God, to nature, to our inner selves, to the spirits, to the ancestors, and even the entire cosmos. Evelyn Underhill points directly to this need when she says that we have an “innate tendency...towards complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever the theological formula under which that order is understood.”¹⁶³ As we shall

¹⁶² Lucana and Elfers, “Sacred Medicine: Indigenous Healing and Mental Health.”

¹⁶³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Kindle (New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

see below, inner connection is a common desideratum and goal of spiritual systems most of which provide guidance and instruction intended on helping individuals to achieve inner and outer connection.



So which of these essential needs does religion meet? Potentially all of them. Take the cognitive needs to know and understand. Religion is definitely an institution that meets the human need to know and understand. Several sociologists have taken this view directly. August Comte, as we saw earlier, believed that religion was a human attempt to understand the nature of reality that went through three stages, a theological, metaphysical, and positive. Clifford Geertz

¹⁶⁴ provided a more general view when he noted that religion provides sacred symbols and ethos that *function* to “synthesize a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life...and their world-view...” and their “moods and motivations.” Spiro says that religious systems help humanity meet the need to know and understand by providing meaning and explanation.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, Sociologist Peter Berger pointed out the existence of **existential imperatives**¹⁶⁶ or what we might like to call “Big Questions,” which religion is set to answer. Big questions are the ultimate questions of existence and cosmology. Berger said these imperatives include questions like “who am I?” and “Why am I here” and “What happens when I die?” We can include other questions here as well, like “Is there a God?” or “How was the universe formed?” Any of the “big” questions of life can be included here.

That religion meets our need to know and understand seems obvious. Whether the religion is Buddhism, Mormonism, or Catholicism, religious institutions do provide answers to life’s big questions. Consider Catholicism. I was raised Catholic and though I left the religion as an adolescent, I know the Catholic answers to life’s big questions.

Is there a God?

Yes, there is God.

Who am I?

You are a child of God

Where did I come from?

God created you.

What's the purpose of life?

To serve God, avoid sin, and redeem yourself.

How was the universe formed?

God said, let there be light, and the universe emerged in a puff of light.

¹⁶⁴ “Religion as a Cultural System,” 3.

¹⁶⁵ Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation.”

¹⁶⁶ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.

If you were raised Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Wiccan, Pagan, or whatever, you will know your religion's answers to the big questions above. All religions everywhere no matter how big or small, mainstream or emergent, provide answers to life's big questions, thereby satisfying our cognitive need to know and understand. *We might even say that a particular focus, and essential feature, of religion is the provision of answers to our big questions.* A religion is an institution that provides answers to your big questions.

This seems sensible and logical, and there is a certain biographical truth to it. Unless you were born into a religion and are subsequently forced to stay there, most people choose their religion based on its ability to answer these big questions in what they feel is a satisfactory manner. If you are an adult member of a church, you are likely there because you believe and are satisfied with the answers your religion provides to your big questions. If at any time you become dissatisfied with the answers your religion provides, you may either go off on some kind of vision quest to try to figure out some things yourself, or you may find a new religion whose answers are more to your liking. People pass in and out of religions and institutions searching for answers that satisfy them. If they don't find answers that satisfy, they move on. You read this a lot in the literature on emergent religions and cults. Pagans, for example, are often "refugees" from traditional western religions. Pagans become pagans, Wiccans become Wiccans, and so on because they were not satisfied with their traditional religious institutions, and went on a search to find something more real and authentic.¹⁶⁷ This is exactly why some guy by the name of "Joel" chose to become a member of the Church of Satan. Joel chose Satanism as his religion not because of some dark, ancient, cosmic, evil, but because, "[having found more questions than answers in the more traditional religious values his family subscribed to,](#)" he felt that Satanism was a "better fit."¹⁶⁸

We look for our answers to big questions and we fish around until we find something that is comfortable and "fits," that satisfies our cognitive needs for truth and understanding and answers

167 Starhawk, *Spiral Dance, The - 20th Anniversary: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess: 20th Anniversary Edition: Starhawk*.

168 Oliver Pelling, "The Joy of Excess: Why a New Generation Is Turning to Satanism," *Huck Magazine*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/new-generation-church-of-satan/>.

our big existential questions. When we find something that satisfies our cognitive needs, we stop and settle in. We stay either until we die or until something happens that unsettles us and provokes us to renew the search for existential peace.

Religion is clearly an institution set up to meet our cognitive need to know and understand the world, but what about our other needs? Religion can meet these as well. Consider our environmental needs for safe, secure, nurturing, and aesthetically pleasing environments. Does religion meet these needs? Yes, and in a couple of ways. As Frazer notes,¹⁶⁹ and as we saw earlier, early humanity used magic and ritual, coupled with beliefs in life forces, to control the environment so that they could obtain better harvests, or safety from the elements. Spiro noted that the Hopi rain ceremonies, and similar spiritual rituals, are designed to get control over reality.¹⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud in his book *Future of an Illusion* suggested religion was about humanity confronting powerful natural forces (tornadoes, winters, floods) and instinctual forces over which had no control. Religion thus provides a sense of security and protection.¹⁷¹ The same use of religion to control the environment is present in modern western Monotheisms which advocate supplication and prayers to influence God's actions in the world. Religion can also meet our need for safe, secure, and nurturing environments by providing ethical guidance (and even legal restrictions) on how we should treat each other. The "Golden Rule" (do unto others), stipulations about karma (if you treat others badly, you will be punished), "Love thy neighbour," Sharia law, and all that jazz encourages humans, not always successfully of course, to create safe environments.

So, religion can meet cognitive and safety needs. What about our other needs, like our emotional needs for acceptance, inclusion, and belongingness, or our psychological need to feel good about ourselves. Religion, like other institutions, can provide for these needs as well. As we have already seen, sociologist Emile Durkheim's saw religion as just this. According to

169 Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*.

170 Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation."

171 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*.

Durkheim, religion was an “eminently social thing” that provided emotional and psychological supports for individuals and that met our need for belonging, safety, and security.¹⁷²

Religion also provides for our alignment needs, our need to be in alignment with our inner selves and inner divinity, and our outer groups. Durkheim pointed out that religion provided a “moral community” that provided guidance and direction and that facilitated solidarity (alignment and connection) with groups.¹⁷³ Sociologist [Joachim Wach](#) points out that religions of all stripes, ancient and modern, East, Middle, and West, generally have an idea of a cosmic order which usually includes a normative element towards which humans are expected to aspire and through which one realizes alignment and connection with the divine order.

Rules of conduct and morals, though they may appear incoherent to the systematic modern mind, are the expressions of an urge to “realize” the divine order, to adapt reality to it, and thereby to secure the functioning of an order upon which depends the existence and well-being of mankind or of a particular group of men.¹⁷⁴

Speaking of inner and outer alignment, almost all religions have what we might call **alignment rule sets** which are rules which purport to guide you on how to behave and act in an aligned fashion towards others, and towards your own inner realities. In Judaism and Christianity, we have the various “commandments;” in Buddhism, we have the Noble Eight Fold Path; in Islam the Qur’an provides alignment rules in general ethical statements like “Worship none but Allah, treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need; speak fair to the people; be steadfast in prayer; and practise regular charity.” (Qur’an 2: 83-84). There is also Sharia law which is the Islamic code of ethics and behaviour. Sufism, the “mystical” branch of Islam, refers to alignment (and how alignment facilitates connection to the Divine) in the context of an individual becoming a reflection of the qualities of God. As one commentator notes of Sufism, “...when a human becomes a perfect slave of God, then God

¹⁷² Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 9.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁴ Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, Routledge Library Editions, Volume 16 (New York: Routledge, 1947), 51, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.188887>.

becomes the eye and ear of that person, who becomes all light and a perfect reflection of God's qualities.”¹⁷⁵ Psychologist William James pointed out the entire purpose of religion was to help us identify with, align, and harmoniously “adjust” to an “unseen order.” “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” We also find the concept of alignment in Indigenous spiritualities. The Huichol of Mexico, for example, work alignment into the very fabric of their lives. As one researcher notes, “The Huichol notion of the sacred is elusive and in many ways difficult for a Westerner to grasp. It seems to embrace above all the concept of attaining wholeness and harmony. To be in accord with one another, with oneself, with one's customs—this is the state of being a proper Huichol and it is sacred.”¹⁷⁶

Finally, as many commentators have pointed out, religion definitely purports to meet our need for connection. It meets our need for outer connection by giving alignment advice on how to get along with people and exist in healthy communities (don't steal, don't sleep with your neighbour's wife). This alignment advice facilitates connection with others. As for inner connection, as we have seen, alignment guidance (which can be found under Ninian Smart's “Ritual and Practical dimension, is designed to facilitate inner connection. More than that, William James, Abraham Maslow, sociologist Joachim Wach, and others have pointed out, religion itself originates in experiences of inner connection to our ancestors, our “angels,” and even to the Divine itself. William James in particular saw the core of religion as an individual connection with the divine. As he said...

...the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case.¹⁷⁷

175 Carl W Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 155.

176 Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*, 73–74.

177 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, 30: emphasis in original.

Abraham Maslow echoed these sentiments when he said

The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion ... has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer. The high religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of this original mystic experience or revelation from the lonely prophet to the mass of human beings in general.¹⁷⁸

We do not have to rely on the thoughts of James and Maslow to see that religious experience is a core aspect of religion and that religion serves this inner need. Even a cursory glance at global spiritual traditions reveals the significance of religious connection. It is a core of Aboriginal dream times,¹⁷⁹ dreaming practices,¹⁸⁰ and shamanic vision questions.¹⁸¹ The main western monotheisms, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, all have mystical traditions.¹⁸²

Let us pause for a moment and review. It seems clear at this point that religion, just like all institutions, is an institution set up to meet a complex array of human needs. Substantively, religious institutions themselves consist of several components all geared, more or less, to meeting more than one of humanity's complex array of needs. These components include a social

178 Maslow, "The 'Core-Religious' or 'Transcendent' Experience," 339.

179 Robert Lawlor, *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1991); Steven Strong and Evan Strong, *Out of Australia: Aborigines, Dreamtime, and the Dawn of the Human Race* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2017).

180 Ignatia Broker, *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative* (Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983).

181 Harner, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*; Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (Taylor & Francis, 1999); Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

182 Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*; Isidor Kalisch, *Sepher Yetzirah: A Book on Creation* (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2006), <https://ia800707.us.archive.org/16/items/Holy-Books/SeferYetzirah.pdf>; St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, Kindle (New York: Dover Publications, 2007); Ewert H Cousins, "Francis of Assisi: Christian Mysticism at the Crossroads," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T Katz (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 163–90, <https://amzn.to/2MlagUS>; J. Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913), <https://archive.org/details/jewishmysticism00abel/page/n7>.

dimension, a ritual/practical dimension, an experiential dimension, a narrative/mythic dimension, a doctrinal dimension, an ethical/legal dimension, and a material dimension.

If we were to stop and define religion at this point, we might provide the following definition.

Religion is an institution set up to meet one or more of humanity's seven essential needs, with an essential focus on providing answers to existential imperatives and with supporting and facilitating the satisfaction of alignment and connection needs. A religious institution itself consists variously of social, ritual/practical, experiential, narrative/mythic, doctrinal, ethical/legal, and material dimensions all geared towards the satisfaction of various human needs.

This definition, which blends substantive and functional definitions of religion, makes a great deal of intuitive and scholarly sense. Intuitively, if you are a faithful person, if you interact with an organized faith, if you examine that interaction, you will probably see that your interaction with your religion revolves around the satisfaction of one or more of your seven essential needs. You go to Church because you think it does something for you, that it meets some of your needs, or that it provides you with the truth of things. You hang out at Church events because doing so meets some of your psychological or emotional needs. When these things stop meeting your various needs, you stop going to them, perhaps searching around and finding an alternative religion.

On a scholarly level, this definition is highly *productive*, meaning it is a great jumping-off place for research. Rather than focusing you narrowly on the elite/ecclesiastical components of religion, as the Sociology of Religion typically does, and rather the engaging in complicated gyrations to try and assert racist boundaries, this definition points you at the multiple substantive and functional components of what is clearly a complex and nuanced human institution. From the dogmatic impositions of elites, through spiritual experiences at the grassroots, through the way religions meet our needs for community and collective support, this definition frames the

field of research in a clear and precise way and provides lots of inspiration for research and investigation.

The First Problem—Boundaries do not Exist

As intuitively sound and productive as this definition of religion might be, there are some problems. The first problem, which is not really a problem in my view, is that this definition does not solve the boundary problem. In fact, it exacerbates it. Consider the substantive side of our definition. All institutions have social, doctrinal, legal, ethical, moral, experiential, and material dimensions. The institution of science, for example, has a social dimension, a ritual dimension (graduation and awards ceremonies), an experiential dimension (including spiritual experiences and enlightenment experience of eureka and “aha”), a narrative/mythic dimension (we all tell ourselves stories about Darwin, evolution, the Big Bang, an empty universe, etc.), a philosophical dimension, an ethical and legal dimension, and a material dimension. The substantive side of the equation is thus not very helpful. If science has all these things, then how do you distinguish it from religion?

Perhaps we can distinguish science from religion based on its functions. Unfortunately, the situation is not any better here. Religions meet basic needs, that is true, but so do secular institutions like education, family, banking, the Boy Scouts, and so on. Still, we do have those inner needs for alignment and connection. Perhaps we can distinguish religion from science or other institutions by its additional focus on these more spiritual inner needs of alignment and connection. Consider a Boy Scout group, for example. It has all the substantive components of an institution and it arguably meets a subset of the basic essential needs, but it does not meet inner needs for alignment and connection, therefore it is not a religion. Or does it? Even a cursory glance at the Boy Scouts reveals they provide alignment guidance and encourage faithful “connection” to the Divine. Their “Scout Oath” requires them, number one, to affirm their belief and submission to God.¹⁸³ They do this because they believe that inner alignment makes them a better, more civically minded person (outer alignment).

183 Bryan Wendell, “About the ‘belief in God’ Requirement in Scouting,” *Bryan on Scouting*, October 3, 2014, <https://blog.scoutingmagazine.org/2014/10/03/belief-in-god-scouting/>.

So is Boy Scouts a religion?

Or, what about the New Age movement? There are lots of people out there who like to think the New Age movement is somehow different than religion. The New Age movement is all about spirituality and finding your own path while religion is all about authority and tradition. But is it different? Functionally, there is nothing to distinguish religion from the New Age movement. The New Age movement provides for some of the basic needs, like our emotional, psychological, and cognitive needs. It also provides for our inner alignment and connection needs by, for example, providing advice and guidance on how to “connect” with spiritual guides and “channel higher consciousness.”¹⁸⁴

So if the New Age movement is not different in functional terms, what about on the substantive side? Those attempting to distinguish New Age spirituality from religion will typically point to its lack of a consistent institutional structure and lack of central authority figures.¹⁸⁵ According to advocates, the New Age movement is all about individual spirituality. It is all about choosing your own path and expressing your truths.¹⁸⁶ Because it is all about the individual, it does not have a significant institutional structure; therefore, it must be different than religion. But is that true? When you examine the New Age movement, you clearly see an institutional framework that exists over and above the individual. The New Age movement has its spokespeople and authoritative figures, who will identify themselves as such, its own publishers and bookstores, its material places of worship (trade shows, conferences, workshops), its narrative and mythical dimension (Atlantis, Star Seeds, shape-changing Lizard people, the eschatological denouement of a grand human experiment), and an experiential dimension (New Agers venture off to Machu Pichu, practice mindfulness, channel the spirits). You even see formal institutional structures, like the [Theosophical Society](#), which preserves and propagates the teachings of the matriarch of the New Age Madame Blavatsky and other Theosophical luminaries.

¹⁸⁴ Jennifer McVey Cht, “How to Channel,” *wikiHow*, 2022, <https://www.wikihow.com/Channel>.

¹⁸⁵ Wade Clark Roof and Lyn Gesch, “Boomers and the Culture of Choice: Changing Patterns of Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary America,” in *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary America*, ed. N Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁸⁶ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

So is the New Age movement a religion or not?

Or what about science? What distinguishes science from religion? Where do we draw the boundaries? Science has all the structural/substantive elements of any human institution *and* it is an institution set up to meet human needs, specifically the cognitive needs to know and understand; but like all human institutions, it meets other basic needs as well, including our physiological needs (scientific advances increase human productivity, provide tools for survival), our emotional needs (conferences, scholarly communities), our psychological needs (graduation and award ceremonies), our need to be powerful and in control over the world, and even our environmental needs for a safe environment because it helps us with the tools and technology that help us create a safe environment. Science also provides answers to existential imperatives, to big questions. You can see this clearly if you lay out the big questions listed earlier and provide the scientific answers to them.

Is there a higher power?

No, a higher power is not needed to explain the world.

Who am I?

You are a naked ape.

Where did I come from?

You evolved from single-cell organisms.

What is the purpose of life?

To struggle, survive and reproduce.

How was the universe formed?

The universe emerged from the Big Bang.

Science even meets needs for alignment and connection. Two schools of psychology, Humanistic and Transpersonal psychology, are both focused on understanding the spiritual side of things. Scholars in the area even provide guidance on alignment and connection.¹⁸⁷ Stanislav

¹⁸⁷ Laszlo, Grof, and Russell, *The Consciousness Revolution*.

Grof, one of the key founders of Transpersonal Psychology, provides techniques like holotropic breathwork¹⁸⁸ designed to facilitate spiritual connection. More recently, positive psychology has embraced mindfulness, which is a stripped-down version of yoga techniques originally designed to facilitate union with God. In case you did not know, yoga is the Sanskrit for union, meaning union (i.e. connection) with the divine. The opening line of the highly respected and still hugely influential *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* indicates the work is all about “instruction in Union.”¹⁸⁹ The work itself provides opening guidance on mindfulness and control of the “thought-streams,” the goal of which is to move us towards connection to God. Of course, this original yogic intent is completely lost in positive psychology’s appropriation and castration of Eastern spirituality, but that’s a story for another time.

As you can see, using comprehensive functional and substantive definitions of religion make it extremely difficult to distinguish science from religion. So what’s an arrogant westerner going to do? The last line of defense is ontological and epistemic. If you cannot distinguish science from religion based on its substantive or functional components, maybe you can distinguish science on ontological and epistemological grounds.

Ontology refers, basically, to the nature of reality. Two basic ontological perspectives exist, materialism and idealism. Materialism is the position that the only thing real is the material world whereas idealism posits other things, like thought or Consciousness, as a-prior, which means before experience. A materialist would never believe in supernatural beings or a consciousness that exists independent of the physical body, but an idealist, somebody who does not limit reality to atoms, molecules, and their emergent properties, would. **Epistemology** concerns what constitutes truth and how we apprehend it; specifically what methods we use to separate truth from falsehood and opinion.

188 Stanislav Grof, “Technologies of the Sacred - Part Two,” *The International Journal of Humanities and Peace* 15, no. 1 (1999): 93–96, doi:https://www.lightningpath.org/readings/Technologies_of_the_sacred_II.pdf.

189 Patanjali, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Threads of Union*, trans. A. K. BonGiovanni (Palm Desert, CA: Sacred-texts.com, 2013), <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/yogasutr.htm>.

On the ontological front, scientists *generally* take a materialist and empirical stance. Scientists generally reject supernatural forces and beings to focus their attention on on what you can “see,” in the sense of being measurable in some way. But only generally. Not all scientists, you see, assume a materialist position. We have already mentioned Transpersonal and Humanistic psychology which are branches of psychology that bend away from a strict materialism. Indeed, many scholars cross the materialist boundaries.¹⁹⁰ Some (perhaps many) scientists even have “enlightenment” experiences,¹⁹¹ forms of connection experience that lead to instant insight and instant solutions to problems. Kekule dreamed the benzene ring, Darwin had innumerable little illuminations,¹⁹² and not a few hard-nosed physical scientists report mystical experiences.¹⁹³ Dossey, a medical doctor, speaks about non-local mind.¹⁹⁴ Some scientists, like psychologist Richard Alpert (popularly known as Ram Dass), have had mystical experiences so powerful they gave up academics and move on to do spiritual work. Even Einstein was not a strict materialist. In fact, Einstein thought mystical experiences were a key part of humanity’s evolutionary path *and* he referred to something he called the “old one” which was not a bearded white patriarch (an image of God he famously rejected),¹⁹⁵ but a vast, superior, and inhuman intelligence behind all of creation.¹⁹⁶

If we cannot draw a clear ontological boundary between religion and science, maybe the difference is methodological. Maybe it is that science has superior training and methods, like the scientific method and peer review, for vetting the truth of things. The general line of argument here is well-rehearsed. Religion derives its knowledge through authority and tradition, while an advanced science is more focused on “positive” empirical testing. In religion, you believe the

190 Elaine Howard Ecklund and Elizabeth Long, “Scientists and Spirituality,” *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2011): 253–74; Elaine Howard Ecklund, *What Scientists Really Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://corpwatch.org/article/what-neoliberalism>.

191 Peter Caws, “The Structure of Discovery,” *Science* 166, no. 3911 (1969): 1375–80.

192 Howard E. Gruber, “On the Relation between AHA Experiences’ and the Construction of Ideas,” *History of Science* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 1981): 41–59, doi:10.1177/007327538101900104.

193 Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists*.

194 Larry Dossey, *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1989); Dossey, “Nonlocal Mind: A (Fairly) Brief History of the Term.”

195 Albert Einstein, “Letter to Erik Gutkind,” 1954, <https://lettersofnote.com/2009/10/07/the-word-god-is-the-product-of-human-weakness/>.

196 Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*, Kindle (Samaira Book Publishers, 2018), <https://amzn.to/2NR8B6z>.

Bible, the Vedas, or the Koran because at some point somebody (your mom, your dad, a priest, a publisher, etc.) told you that you should. Science, on the other hand, does not kowtow to authority for truth and understanding. Scientists make observations. Scientists do experiments.

There is some merit to this notion. There is definitely a difference between science and religion in their methods. There is no expectation that priests provide proof that God exists, or that they explain God's "mysterious ways." Religious followers are generally advised not to question church doctrine and to use faith (in God, the special avatar who brought "the message") to allay their doubts and questions. Scientists, on the other hand, do the opposite of this. They do not expect you to believe their truths based on their authority. They look for and provide evidence so that you can decide. Scientists also put a lot of effort into refining and putting into practice their methods for acquiring truth and understanding. They also spend a lot of time going over each other's work to try and eliminate bias and error. When scientists publish papers, other scientists (their peers) examine, evaluate and review their papers before publication to try and remove as any errors.

Because scientists are focused on evidence and not authority, because scientists are continually struggling to improve experimental methods, because scientists place evidence at the centre of their world, because scientists are constantly checking each other's work, scientists are a lot quicker to admit when they have made mistakes. Consequently, *science is self-correcting*. By way of contrast with religion, Catholic doctrine, for example, hasn't changed much in 2,000 years; however, science changes all the time. Witness David Mech, the man who coined the term "alpha male." Mech originally said that wolves organized themselves naturally into dominance hierarchies with an Alpha male on the top. Unfortunately, as he later admitted, he made a huge observational error. He generalized from the behaviour of male wolves held in captivity to wolves in their natural environment.¹⁹⁷ Male wolves respond to the stress of captivity by organizing themselves into dominance hierarchies. However, as he later learned, in their natural environment, wolves function as family units with no single alpha male and with adult male and

197 David Mech, "Whatever Happened to the Term Alpha Wolf," *International Wolf*, Winter 2008; David Mech, "Outmoded Notion of the Alpha Wolf," 2015, <http://www.davemech.org/news.html>; David L. Mech, "Leadership in Wolf, *Canus Lupus*, Packs," *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 11, no. 2 (2000): 259–63.

female wolves acting as responsible parental units. When Mech realized his error, he recanted his mistake and withdrew the term.¹⁹⁸ You don't find the same sort of responsiveness to correct errors in religion. Despite the advancement of human methods and knowledge, religion does not focus on methods and does not change that much.

So, is it this focus on methods and "error correction" which makes science different than religion? Perhaps. But once again, the boundaries are not strict. As we saw earlier, magic and religion are not solely based in authority and tradition. There *is* empirical testing. On the other side, despite the emphasis on empirical methods, scientists are not perfect. Their empirical focus and methodological rigour does not prevent them from making mistakes, nor does it make them necessarily more open-minded and willing to change than the average priest or pastor. In fact Thomas Kuhn suggested that science was one of the most conservative institutions around. He argued that scientists were rarely prepared to change their fundamental beliefs on the basis of new evidence and that fundamental paradigmatic change required the older generation to die off, because the older gatekeepers were too stubborn to change their thinking.¹⁹⁹ There seems to be some truth in this. Scientists can sometimes be just as closed-minded, autocratic, and absolutist when it comes to its answers to the big questions as any priest or guru. In fact, sometimes, they even act like priests. Yinger notes many scientists sanctify science just like priests sanctify religion, by presenting it as a superior path towards truth. "Sanctity is the quality of unquestioned truthfulness imputed by the faithful to unverifiable propositions...."²⁰⁰ This is no different than when Copernicus and Galileo were challenging the ontological foundations of the authoritative Church world view. At the time, priests sanctified their religion by claiming an exclusive path to God's truth. They also sputtered and puffed that it was their way or the highway (excommunication), even going so far as to torture and kill heretics who stood outside the Catholic faith. Torture and murder are off the table these days, but two of the staples of priestly authority, public shaming and excommunication, are not. Consider the example of biochemist Rupert Sheldrake who, after publishing a book called *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of*

198 Mike Sosteric, "Are Bullies Alpha Males or Sick Puppies," *The Conversation*, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/are-bullies-alpha-males-or-sick--93524>.

199 Thomas Samuel Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

200 Rappaport quoted in Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, 12.

Formative Causation,²⁰¹ was publicly shamed and summarily excommunicated by a “hysterical” John Maddox, senior editor of the journal *Nature*. The establishment stopped short of burning his book, though they did say it was the “best candidate for burning there has been for many years....”²⁰² The hostility directed towards Sheldrake when he stepped outside the boundaries of the accepted scholarly canon was severe, the consequences harsh and punitive. Sheldrake was ejected from the academy, thus ending his academic career.²⁰³

So, is science a religion?

Probably not, although sometimes it functions as such. Whatever personal judgment you make, you can see that the functional and substantive definitions provided in this commentary do not solve the boundary problem, and may actually exacerbate the problem by highlighting all the ways science bleeds into religion. As complicated as this makes the situation, the tension between the two poles is probably a good thing. Trying to impose boundaries when they do not in fact exist is an ethnocentric exercise, not a scholarly one. More to the point, humans are complex and creative. They do not honour the boundaries scholars attempt to impose. They can make their institutions serve whatever needs they want and it would be empirically wise if we would admit this. Even a thing like professional sports can be bent to serve certain spiritual needs. As students of human behaviour looking at human religion, we should embrace the messy nature. I can assure you, it won’t be wasted effort and we will understand things better in the end.

The Second Problem—Where’s the Sociology?

Insert distinction between elite religion and authentic religion. Pick in up in unit two, sociology of religion

Speaking of the messy nature of our institutions, a second problem with the definition of religion provided herein is that it is not quite comprehensive enough. Recall the definition

201 *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation* (London: Paladin, 1987).

202 Anthony. Freeman, “The Sense of Being Glared At: What Is It Like to Be a Heretic?,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12, no. 6 (2005): 20 Maddox quoted in.

203 Freeman, “The Sense of Being Glared At: What Is It Like to Be a Heretic?”

Religion is an institution set up to meet one or more of humanity's seven essential needs, with an essential focus on providing answers to existential imperatives and with supporting and facilitating the satisfaction of alignment and connection needs. A religious institution itself consists variously of social, ritual/practical, experiential, narrative/mythic, doctrinal, ethical/legal, and material dimensions all geared towards the satisfaction of various human needs.

This definition might look complete, but it is not. This definition provides no awareness of the significance of gender, ethnicity, or social class in the formation and operation of religious institutions. As a sociologist, I can tell you that these are significant factors. We might say this definition is sociologically naive, meaning it does not include any sociological analysis; therefore, we need to expand this definition to include awareness of the sociological aspects of religion. Perhaps the easiest and most lucid way of moving this forward is to use the functional definition of religion as an institution that meets human needs as a starting point. From there, we can say that religion is an institution setup to address the seven essential needs, but not just the seven essential needs. Religion can be bent to meet other needs that have nothing to do with human growth, human development, and human happiness. Karl Marx for example, saw religion as an institution meeting humanity's need for an anaesthetic to deal with the suffering caused by Capitalism. Capitalism harmed people by depriving them of the full value of their labour, emiserating workers and enriching those who stole the added value produced by their labour. Marx regarded religion as an opiate that numbed workers sense of righteous outrage at the capitalist structures that were the source of the physical, moral and mental harms done to them Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).. Religion as the "opium of the people" was a narcotic form of pain relief that caused further harm under the Capitalist system. Influenced by Marx, members of the Frankfurt School saw religion as a device used to "enslave and tame" the individual by using higher motivations and higher values to tying its congregation into the capitalist regime of accumulation Roberta Cipriani, *Sociology of Religion: A Historical Introduction* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 147..

We might call needs that do not have anything to do with human growth, human development, and human happiness **non-essential needs**. Non-essential needs are needs that emerge as a consequence of the things that happen around us. If you crash your car and are bleeding, you have a need for immediate medical assistance. This need is, of course, essential in the moment, but it has nothing to do with your biological needs for growth and development. Therefore, it is non-essential.

The need for pain relief in relation to the Capitalist system is a non-essential need. It emerges as a consequence of the suffering caused by the Capitalist Regime of Accumulation. Our need for pain-relief is not the only non-essential need that religion meets. Indeed, religions can be bent to serve many non-essential needs, like an Emperor's need for power a supportive ideology, the needs a patriarch for indoctrination and control of women, a government's need for citizen compliance, a corporations need for profit, etc.

We do not have to go very far to find examples. The Persian autocrat Ardashir took control of the Zoroastrian faith, created his own version, and then mercilessly destroyed popular alternatives.²⁰⁴ Zoroastrianism was rooted in the mystical utterances of Zoroaster who lived around 1,000 BCE, but these beliefs were subsequently co-opted, modified in currently unclear ways, and turned into colonial tools by the autocrat Ardashir and his high priest Tanser. Tanser was primarily responsible for writing down Zoroaster's teachings, which existed primarily as word of mouth teachings prior. Tanser began the process of writing down the word of mouth teachings when he declared Ardashir the final arbiter of the Zoroastrian doctrine, suggesting that Ardashir was "more richly endowed with virtues than the ancients...." Tanser further suggested that Ardashir was uniquely qualified to revive a faith that had "decayed" because he was a man of "true and upright judgment...."²⁰⁵ Once the authority of Ardashir had been proclaimed, Tanser then selected a single Zoroastrian tradition among several that were available in the region, after which he brutally and with "excessive bloodshed"²⁰⁶ sterilized the Zoroastrian field by suppressing all other word of mouth traditions that existed at the time.

204 Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

205 Ibid., 103.

206 Ibid.

"...in place of the former fraternity of regional communities, a single Zoroastrian church was created under the direct and authoritarian control of Persia; and together with this went the establishment of a single canon of Avestan text, approved and authorized by Tanser... Tanser set about his business and selected one tradition and left the rest out of the canon. And he issued this decree: The interpretation of all the teachings of the Mazda-worshipping religion is our responsibility." ²⁰⁷

Why would the autocrat Ardashir claim interpretive superiority, reduce the Zoroastrian faith to a single canon, and violently subdue competing understandings? The answer to these questions is simple. Ardashir re-created the Zoroastrian faith as an elite master narrative and subsequently used the Zoroastrian religion as propaganda. He used it to consolidate power and gain domination over his enemies. He and his high priest created a master narrative which provided the "sacred" beliefs and values which influenced how people think about themselves and the world and how they act in the world. He used the religion not for the good of humanity and not because he thought it reflected truth, but to control behaviour. That Ardashir used Zoroastrian word-of-mouth teachings to create a discourse is made clear by Boyce when she says,

Ardashir was not only a military genius, but a man of great shrewdness and administrative talents, who was prepared to use bloodless means as well as warlike ones to establish his rule and create a new Persian empire; and one of the tools which he chose for this was religious propaganda. There can be little doubt that the priests of Persia, whose forefather had led to Zoroastrian community under the Achaemenians, felt themselves well fitted to do so again; and they plainly undertook with zeal the task of persuading their fellow Iranians that they, together with the new dynasty to which they lent their support, were more devout and orthodox, and would be truer upholders of the faith, than their Parthian predecessors had been.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 101–2.

Aradashir is not the only example of the .001 percent messing around with the spiritual and religious beliefs of this planet. Centuries later.²⁰⁹ As with Zoroastrian beliefs, which were anti-elite to begin with, Christ was anti-elite with a remarkably progressive mission and message.²¹⁰ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,” he said, “because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” (Luke 4:18). Unfortunately, Christ’s progressive messaging was a threat to elite prerogative and they had him assassinated.²¹¹ When that did not work to stop the spread of his progressive messaging, Roman Emperor Constantine “converted” to (really, the proper term is co-opted) Christianity and subsequently set about to control and modify (read colonize) the grass-roots Christian narrative.²¹² Unlike the case with the Zoroastrian faith, we do have some idea of what the elites did once they captured the cannon and that is, they manipulated it. They did this first by determining what constituted Christian canon and then by hiding the texts away from mass eyes for centuries while elite scribes edited the texts in privacy.²¹³ What did the scribes add and subtract? It is a question that needs research but we know for sure that they *added* patriarchy to the texts. Edits in the Bible changed how Christians viewed the role of women. Conservatives generally assume the New Testament has a conservative and sexist view of women, and it is certainly a product of its time. However, there is evidence to suggest that Jesus and his apostles had a more progressive view of women’s status than most patriarchs would like to admit. For example, in Mathew 22: 24–30, Jesus criticizes the notion that women should be considered property. Here Christians are told the story of a woman who is passed off between seven brothers as if she is property of the family. One by one the brothers die and the wife is forced to marry the next one in line. Finally, she dies and the question is, who will she *belong* to in heaven. Jesus’s answer is simple; she will belong to no one.

209 Mike Sosteric, “Rethinking the Origins and Purpose of Religion: Jesus, Constantine, and the Containment of Global Revolution,” *Athens Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2020): 69–88, doi:10.30958/ajss.9-1-4.

210 Ibid.

211 Mike Sosteric, “From Zoroaster to Star Wars, Jesus to Marx: The Art, Science, and Technology of Mass Human Manipulation,” *Athens Journal of Philosophy*, 2024, doi:10.30958/ajphil.3-4-1.

212 Sosteric, “Rethinking the Origins and Purpose of Religion: Jesus, Constantine, and the Containment of Global Revolution.”

213 Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; Mike Sosteric, “Editing the Bible for Patriarchy,” *Academia.Edu*, 2020, <https://www.academia.edu/43721896>.

‘Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?” Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

In other words, when the Kingdom comes, women will not be treated as property. The Bible records that the people listening were “astonished” by this teaching, presumably because it was so out of line with the patriarchy of the day that it elicited audible gasps.

The apparent rejection of women as property is not the only astonishing teaching you find in the Bible. Some early Christians, in particular the apostle Paul, had a very progressive, even non-binary, notion of gender. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he admonishes them for straying from the truth path. He also dismisses the notion of gender entirely, pointing out the basic spiritual truth that, in Spirit, in Christ, we are all united as one. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (3: 28–29)

Women are not property. Male and female are irrelevant. These are remarkably progressive messages that resonate down to this day. And these are not the only ones. We also find in the Bible that women played prominent and active roles in the early Church. Jesus was accompanied by women on his travels, women provided financial support for him and his disciples, he engaged in public dialogue with women and, as Ehrman points out, it was women who were “present at his crucifixion” and who “alone remained faithful to him at the end, when the male disciples had fled” (Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40–41).²¹⁴

214 Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, 178–79.

So what happened? Why were women excluded from positions of authority in the emerging Catholic Church even though they clearly were prominent in the beginning? Why do conservative Christian communities often use the Bible to justify the suppression of the female sex, or the persecution of non-binary people? The reality is, the Bible is not the verbatim word of God, it is the result of a struggle, a *contest* between those, like Jesus Christ, representing a more progressive view of human nature and human spirituality, and those propounding a more conservative view where men of power dominate the field. Thus, a certain group of scribes, working for a Church created by Roman Emperor Constantine altered the text with the explicit intent of diminishing the role of women. According to Bart D. Ehrman, there is overwhelming evidence that scribes altered original texts “to make them coincide more closely with [their] own sense of the (limited) role of women in the church.”²¹⁵ In fact, scribes that edited the Bible literally told women to submit, shut up, and bear children. In 1 Timothy 2, we read

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing — if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

And in 1 Corinthians 14: 33–36 we find

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

These two passages provide a very conservative view of women as inferior and submissive breeders. The problem with these passages, as Ehrman points out, is that the entirety of 1 Timothy was not written by the apostle Paul but by somebody who came along later. Similarly,

²¹⁵ Ibid., 178–79.

the passage in 1 Corinthians 14 was added later as well. Both justify the extreme suppression of women and both were inserted later as part of a political effort to “suppress the role of women in the churches....”²¹⁶ These were not the only changes. “In almost every instance in which a change of this sort occurs, the text is changed in order to limit the role of women and to minimize their importance to the Christian movement.”²¹⁷ As a consequence of this suppression, the existence of female apostles was erased as was the fact that women played prominent roles in the early Christian church as deacons, preachers, and such.

So what are we to make of this? For one, it calls into question the notion that everything having to do with human spirituality and religion is reactionary and oppressive, as polemicists like Richard Dawkins²¹⁸ suggest. In addition, and as a sociologist, I have some questions, most important of which is what exactly was going on? Ehrman limits interference in the sacred scriptures to individual scribes, saying that “scribes sometimes changed their texts in order to make them coincide more closely with the scribes’ own sense of the (limited) role of women in the church,” but it is unlikely, given the authoritarian hierarchies that characterize the Catholic Church, that scribes worked without direction from their superiors. What is more likely is that elites edited the teachings to serve their own non-essential needs for power and control.

A Zoroastrian faith hijacked by a Persian emperor and a Bible edited in the interests of European patriarchs demonstrates how a human spirituality focused on satisfying essential needs can be hijacked by special interest groups to serve their special-interest needs. These are not the only examples by far. There are lots of examples where elites might have messed around with religion and human spirituality, mucking about and modifying the social, ritual, experiential, mythic/narrative, philosophical, ethical/legal, and material dimensions to suit their particular agendas—to meet their needs for power, control, and profit. In fact, when you look, you find their fingerprints everywhere. The patriarch of Protestantism, Martin Luther, came from an established capitalist family. The primogeniture of the modern Tarot system A.E. Waite, a system which the world’s foremost tarot scholars called the “...most successful propaganda campaign

216 Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, 181.

217 Ibid., 182.

218 *The God Delusion*.

ever launched”²¹⁹ because of how the elite so skilfully imposed their hegemonic frames, was a member of elite Freemason lodges.²²⁰ Helena Blavatsky, matriarch of the modern new age movement and founder of the still-influential Theosophical society was, a member of Russian Dolgorouky dynasty. It is an eyes-wide-open secret, really, and one that is so well hidden in plain sight that even sociologists, a group of scholars who should be the first to identify, analyze, and understand the nature of elite interference in the religious fabric of this planet, have largely missed this point entirely. The closest anybody got was Marx and his buddy Engels, but even their definition and understandings are wholly inadequate, and ultimately dismissive.²²¹

If we accept the fact that spirituality is a flexible institution that can meet the essential growth needs of humans and also the non-essential needs of special interest groups, such as patriarchal elites and neo-liberal, multinational corporations, then we need to expand our definition, like so.

*Religion is a complicated and flexible human institution set up to meet essential **and non-essential** human needs. Religions are organized around a core emphasis on providing answers to our big questions, with a usual emphasis on the satisfaction of alignment and connection needs as the institutional core. A religious institution itself consists of social, ritual/practical, experiential, narrative/mythic, doctrinal, ethical/legal, material dimensions, and healing dimensions all geared towards the satisfaction of various human needs.*

This definition is complete and productive, meaning that it gives us a lot of opportunity for study and research. Unfortunately, this definition does not solve the boundary problem. In fact, it completely removes any hope that we might be able to establish such a boundary because there is simply no boundary there, which is fine. Unless our concern is to demonstrate our European/scientific/patriarchal superiority over other

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220 Mike Sosteric, “A Sociology of Tarot,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 3 (2014), doi:0.29173/cjs20000.

221 Sosteric, “Rethinking the Origins and Purpose of Religion: Jesus, Constantine, and the Containment of Global Revolution.”

institutions and systems of knowledge, we do not need to assert a boundary to study and understand religion. And in fact, we should not. We can productively and meaningfully live with the overlap in institutional substance and function. In fact, I think this is the only way forward. If we continue to insist on drawing strict boundaries, we will be forever stymied in our approach to and understanding of religion. It is only when we put aside our cultural arrogance in favour of respect and reciprocity that we will enable our individual and collective progress forward.

Conclusion

This brings us to an end of this little booklet and our short journey. We started our journey by asking the question, “what is religion?” As we saw, scholars have had a hard time figuring out what religion is. This is because they have been stymied by an Occam-led desire to oversimplify, coupled with ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and even racist bias. This has resulted in simplistic, caricatured, and frankly embarrassing views and definitions of religion. As we have seen, the way forward is straightforward. We observe what’s actually there with an open mind and embrace the complexity. When we do that, religion as an institution that meets several of our essential human needs, as well as some not so essential needs, comes into focus. Of course, if we do this, we forever abandon the possibility of asserting clear boundaries between Indigenous spirituality, Western religion, and other human institutions because these boundaries do not exist—there is simply too much overlap.

Putting aside our concern to draw boundaries and embracing the complexity is the only way forward because it breaks open our study and puts us on a proper path towards understanding. Putting aside our concern to draw boundaries and embracing the complexity immediately enhances our understanding of religion, provides us with a productive definition that can simulate thought and original research, and brings to the surface centuries of elite interference in spiritual thought and practice, an interference which ranges from direct autocratic seizure of powerful and progressive grass-roots spirituality (Zoroaster, Jesus Christ), to scholarly suppression of Indigenous spiritual systems, to fanciful construction of new religious movements

(Helen Blavatsky and the New Age movements), to the creation of powerful propaganda devices like the tarot. Embracing complexity and eliminating boundaries also frees up some space for a more open minded, even sympathetic, appraisal of spirituality, and in particular Indigenous spirituality, which contrary to the expectations of some tend to have a much more nuanced and sophisticated view of human beings and their relations to self, community, earth, and the cosmos²²² than the violent and two-dimensional Western monotheisms pimped by European elites. Presumably, facilitating this examination will lead to a less ethnocentric and arrogant disparagement of Indigenous spirituality, as well as an important sensitization to the existence of the progressive, authentic, grassroots spirituality found in Indigenous spiritual systems, in the teachings of the working-class carpenter Jesus Christ, in the contested spaces of modern feminist spiritual systems like Wicca, and so on. Finally, eschewing boundaries and embracing the complexity is the first step in any serious effort to respond to the “call for an end to the stigmatization of indigenous culture and characterization of Western traditions as superior.”²²³ It is the first step in any serious and authentic attempt to decolonize not only the study of religion and spirituality, but religion and spirituality as well. It is certainly necessary and needed. As we can see even after this short introduction, human spirituality and religion are thoroughly and completely colonized by elite actors who have used it in various complex and sophisticated ways to further their colonialist, capitalist, accumulation agendas. It is no understatement to say we have not even begun to understand this colonization or our role in it.

---chapter

is religion important. Yes. [review literature]

but only insofar as it meets certain essential needs

and not in any sense in which it is different than any other institutions.

Evaluate a religion based on its ability to meet needs it was designed to meet, or more appropriate, should meet. .

222 Lucana and Elfers, “Sacred Medicine: Indigenous Healing and Mental Health.”

223 Ibid., 4484.

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