CHRISTIANITY and RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

CLARIFYING CHRISTIAN COMMITMENTS
in a GLOBALIZING AGE

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Introduction

In his haunting 1971 classic song "Imagine," John Lennon invites us to consider a world without religion. Although Lennon assures us that imagining such a world is "easy if you try," this is not so easily done in the early twenty-first century. Religion, in one form or another, is inescapable in much of the world today, and it is difficult indeed to conceptualize our present world without the influences—positive and negative—of religion.

One cannot appreciate current events without having some understanding of the role of religious institutions, beliefs, and practices in societies throughout the world. The significance of religion today is acknowledged not only by religious studies specialists but also by political scientists, economists, military strategists, marketing specialists, the media, and business leaders. Although the numbers of atheists, agnostics, and the nonreligious are increasing, much of the world remains highly religious.[1]

Christian leaders in Asia and Africa have been aware of the importance of understanding other religious traditions for a long time, and Western missionaries generally have understood that effective ministry requires some grasp of the surrounding religious worldviews. Debates over contextualization of the gospel inevitably involve grappling with local religious concepts, institutions, and practices.[2] But the religious landscape of Europe and North America is rapidly changing, and among Western Christian leaders there also is growing

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1. See Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Pilpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: Norton, 2011); Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

2. Until relatively recently, many Western Christians have assumed that contextualization of the gospel is something that occurs only when Western missionaries take the gospel to non-Western

appreciation of the need for understanding other religious traditions. Christian theologians are increasingly addressing issues in the theology of religions as a regular part of their discipline. Given globalization, ordinary lay Christians find themselves interacting with religious others within their own neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Pastors and chaplains are finding that some understanding of other religions is essential for their ministries. Whereas it used to be possible for European or American Christians to leave questions about other religions to missionaries or religious studies specialists, this is no longer the case. Western societies are becoming more religiously diverse; with increasing globalization, questions about the relation between the Christian faith and other religious ways can no longer be ignored.

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of religion, however, there is often confusion over just what we mean by "religion" and how religious beliefs, values, and practices relate to other aspects of individual and communal life. Misunderstandings also arise concerning particular religions, such as Islam, and their relation to Christianity. Christian theologians, pastors, missiologists, and laypeople struggle with how they should think about and respond to other religious traditions. European and American societies are undergoing massive social, cultural, and religious changes, and many Christians are perplexed about how to make sense of the new realities.

In the chapters that follow, I explore some of the issues emerging from the increased awareness of religious diversity in the West. This is not a book on the theology of religions; elsewhere I have written on theological issues in the encounter with religious others.[3] But although not strictly an exercise in theology of religions, the discussion in these chapters is very relevant to theological debates about the religions. Current discussions in theology of religions are sometimes problematic because they are based on flawed understandings of the concept of religion itself, the relation between religion and culture, or the nature of particular religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. Responsible theology of religions requires more than simply sound biblical exegesis; it also demands proper understanding of the phenomena that go under the category of religion. In this sense, this book is an attempt to clarify certain basic concepts, to show how religions have been shaped by modernization and in turn adapted to it, and to explore some of the epistemological issues arising from Christians' new awareness of religious diversity.

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cultures. Thankfully, there is growing appreciation of the fact that all cultures, including Western cultures, need appropriate contextualization of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), chap. 10; Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

This is not a comprehensive introduction to the subject of religion in the modern world. What follows is a highly selective treatment of some issues, especially as they relate to the theme of religious diversity in the modern world and the implications for Christian commitments. For many people in Europe and North America, the growing awareness of religious diversity and disagreement has made it more difficult to believe that there is one true religion and that Christianity is in fact the true religion. This is not the case with everyone: many Christians remain untroubled by religious diversity and experience few doubts about the truth of their beliefs. But many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, find the new realities deeply disturbing and question whether it makes any sense to claim that Jesus Christ is the one Lord and Savior for all peoples in all cultures at all times. One response to such questions is to become agnostic about all religious claims: how could we possibly know which religious tradition, if any, is true? Another popular response is to embrace some form of religious pluralism and maintain that, in spite of the obvious differences among the religions, they can all (or at least the "good" ones) be regarded as more or less equally true and effective ways of responding to the religious ultimate. This book is primarily addressing the cluster of issues associated with these responses.

The chapters in part 1 examine the concept of religion itself, as well as the idea of world religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, and consider some ways in which our understanding of religion and the religions have been shaped by the processes of modernization and globalization. There is a complex but fascinating story to be told here, and understanding these developments can help us to avoid some problematic assumptions about religion today. Chapter 1 considers some recent debates over the concept of religion, issues in the definition of religion, and the relation of religion to culture. This sets out the conceptual framework for understanding religion that is adopted through succeeding chapters.

Ways in which the religions have been shaped by modernization and globalization are explored in chapter 2, with special attention being given to the much-debated notion of secularization. While classical secularization theory is now largely discredited, there are important ways in which societies and religions change with modernization and globalization. One effect of these transformations is that religious commitments are made with the awareness of other available options, resulting in epistemological uncertainty about one's own beliefs.

Today many think of the great world religions as unchanging, static entities simply passed on from ancient times to the present. Chapter 3 looks at Buddhism in the modern world, reporting ways in which it has adapted to modern,

global realities. One of the by-products of the modern missionary movement and globalization is the fact that Jesus is now a global figure, adopted by many different religious traditions. Chapter 4 traces the theme of Jesus as one among many great religious leaders, showing how this is developed by Indian leaders in the Hindu Renaissance such as Mahatma Gandhi, the Western religious pluralist John Hick, and the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo.

The chapters in part 2 are concerned with implications from the preceding discussion for Christian commitments. Chapters 5 through 7 pursue some of the philosophical issues stemming from our awareness of religious diversity while justifying our religious beliefs. The popular idea that all the major religions can somehow be accepted as true is shown to be untenable in chapter 5. What does it really mean to say that Christianity is the true religion? Some of the issues involved in such a claim are explored in chapter 6. Although I do not argue for its truth here, I clarify in what sense one might make such a claim and what might be involved in justifying it. Does awareness of religious disagreement and diversity require Christians to provide sufficient evidence for their own beliefs in order to be rational in so believing? This question takes us to the heart of some of the more controversial issues in religious epistemology. Various responses to the question are explored, and I offer my own conclusions about the place of reasons and evidence for belief in light of religious diversity. The final chapter briefly discusses how disciples of Jesus Christ should live and witness amid religiously diverse and pluralistic societies.

The issues addressed in this book have been with me for a long time. As a child of missionary parents in northern Japan, I was quite aware of religious differences between the small number of Japanese Christians in church with us on Sunday and the many other Japanese who frequented local Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Much later, as an adult living in Japan and teaching at a theological college, I had to address questions about the relation of Christianity to Japanese religious and cultural traditions. During my doctoral studies in philosophy, I had the privilege of studying under John Hick, who at the time was working on what later became *An Interpretation of Religion*, his version of religious pluralism.[4] My first book, *Dissonant Voices*, was an early attempt to respond to the issues raised by Hick.[5] Although I reject his model of religious pluralism, I have always felt that Hick had an unusually keen understanding of the epistemological issues raised by religious diversity.

4. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; 2nd ed., 2004).

5. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Since 1993 I have been teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, in two very different areas: philosophy of religion and missions / intercultural studies. While working with very different bodies of literature and keeping current in the debates in two distinct academic disciplines is certainly challenging, I have found the rewards of such interdisciplinary study to be very significant. The subject of this book in particular demands an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon history, intercultural studies, philosophy, and religious studies in addition to theology. I am grateful to Trinity for the opportunity to teach courses that encourage such interdisciplinary research and reflection. It is a privilege to be able to teach bright and thoughtful students, and the material in the following chapters has been discussed and debated in many classes at Trinity over the years.

I am indebted to many people who have helped me in my understanding of these issues. While I cannot mention everyone by name, a few should definitely be credited. I am grateful to the late John Hick for the privilege of studying with him and through his influence being forced to grapple with the epistemological questions prompted by religious diversity. In the past few years I have participated in some public discussions with Paul Knitter on religious pluralism. He has helped me to better understand the diversity among pluralists and also to think more carefully about some of my own positions.[6] I have also benefited from conversations on these issues with Tim Tennent, Richard Mouw, Gerald McDermott, Terry Muck, and many others. I am especially grateful to my colleagues Keith Yandell, Bob Priest, Tom McCall, Peter Cha, and my brother John Netland for carefully reading and commenting on earlier drafts of these chapters. Their advice has strengthened the argument throughout and prevented even greater deficiencies in the text than what remain.

Special thanks are also due to Jim Kinney of Baker Academic. Jim has been supportive of this project and patient in spite of numerous delays, and this book would not have been completed without his persistent encouragement.

Finally, portions of chapter 7 appeared in earlier form in my article "Natural Theology and Religious Diversity"[7] and are included here with permission of the journal editors.

6. The product of one such public discussion is *Can Only One Religion Be True? Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
7. *Faith and Philosophy* 21.4 (October 2004): 501–18.

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Rethinking Religion(s)

Talk about religion in general or particular religions such as Islam or Hinduism is so common today that it is easy to assume we know just what we mean by these terms. But this is not necessarily the case. Although we do have a general sense of the meaning of "religion," trying to clarify just what religion is and how it differs from what is not religious can be perplexing. Confusion over meaning can result in problematic judgments in a variety of areas, from public policy debates to theological conclusions about other religions or even missiological experiments in contextualizing the gospel in diverse cultural settings. In this chapter we will try to clarify the concept of religion by examining issues in definition, the modern construction of the concept of religion, and the relation between the concepts of religion, worldview, and culture. We begin by considering two different ways of understanding religion: the theological and the phenomenological approaches.

Theological and Phenomenological Understandings of Religion

It is not unusual for Christians to make a distinction between religion and the Christian faith: while the beliefs and practices of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Daoists might exemplify religion, those of genuine Christians do not. After all, the Christian faith is not about religion at all; it is a relationship with the

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living God through Jesus Christ. Religion is about empty, meaningless rituals, whereas genuine Christian faith involves the gift of new life by God's grace.

But Christians are not the only ones to exempt their own commitments from the category of religion. Buddhists typically insist that Buddhism is not a religion, that it is a philosophy. Hindus deny that their practices and beliefs constitute religion; they are simply following a way of life rooted in the eternal dharma (Truth), or *sanatana*-dharma. Similarly, Daoists say they are simply living in accordance with the Dao (Way). And so on. It is not unusual for religious believers to regard their own beliefs and practices as exceptional.

It is true that being a disciple of Jesus Christ cannot be equated simply with joining the religion of Christianity. But acknowledging this does not settle the question whether being a follower of Jesus involves participating in religion. What we need is a clear understanding of the concept of religion and how being a disciple of Jesus is related to this concept. One approach to the issue is to characterize religion in explicitly Christian theological categories and themes. Religion in general, as well as particular religions, are then understood in terms of Christian values and teachings. This is often the approach taken by Christian theologians and missiologists, and it serves an important function. Thoughtful Christians trying to make sense of the world we live in need to develop a genuinely Christian perspective on the religions, and doing so requires use of Christian categories and themes.

Perhaps the most well-known Christian characterization of religion is that given by the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth: "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion."[1] Based on a particular interpretation of this lengthy section in his *Church Dogmatics*, many readers have understood Barth as being very negative on the religions. In the English translation of the *Dogmatics*, Barth is presented as claiming that God's revelation in Jesus Christ results in the abolition of religion and that religion is to be rejected as unbelief. But recent studies have shown that Barth's views were actually more subtle and complex than initially presumed.[2]

1. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I/2 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 280–361 (see esp. paragraph 17). An earlier version of this section appeared in Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227–33.

2. See Peter Harrison, "Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23.2 (Spring 1986): 207–24; Garrett Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion," *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 473–86; J. A. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 243–57.

The English translation of Barth's *Dogmatics* rendered *Aufhebung der Religion* as "abolition of religion," but this has been criticized for missing the subtlety of Barth's position. Garrett Green suggests the term "sublation" instead of "abolition" as a more accurate rendering of Barth's position.[3] Barth's discussion actually contains a tension between God's revelation as the dissolution and the elevation of religion, something captured better in "sublation" than "abolition." Moreover, Barth also characterizes religion as *Unglaube*, a term usually translated as "unbelief." But Green argues that a better translation is "faithlessness" or "unfaith."[4] When seen in light of God's revelation, human religiosity is thus characterized by the lack of faith, or "an unwillingness to yield to the saving power of divine grace and revelation, and to surrender all those purely human attempts to know and satisfy God which together comprise human religion and religiosity."[5]

Barth's comments on religion are located within his broader discussion of the possibility of revelation in light of the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth begins this extensive section with a critique of the manner in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal theology placed the notion of religion—rather than God's revelation—at the center of theological inquiry. According to Barth, the result was an unhealthy "reversal of revelation and religion." Instead of interpreting religious expression in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, theologians interpret revelation in terms of religion.[6] Barth staunchly opposes any attempt to identify God's revelation with even the best in human civilization, as he believes that classical liberalism did. Di Noia states, "It is this reversal of revelation and religion that Barth laments and, in paragraph 17, endeavors to correct."[7] Barth declares,

> Revelation is God's self-offering and self-manifestation. Revelation encounters man on the presupposition and in confirmation of the fact that man's attempts to know God from his own standpoint are wholly and entirely futile; not because of any necessity in principle, but because of a practical necessity of fact. In revelation God tells man that He is God, and that as such He is his Lord. In telling him this, revelation tells him something utterly new, something which apart from revelation he does not know and cannot tell either himself or others.[8]

3. Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon," 477. Peter Harrison proposes "superseding" as a better translation. Harrison, "Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions," 208n3.
4. Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon," 480.
5. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," 250.
6. Barth, *Word of God*, 284.
7. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," 248.
8. Barth, *Word of God*, 301.

Thus, when religion—including empirical Christianity as manifest throughout history—is viewed in light of divine revelation, it is revealed as *Unglaube*, or faithlessness. But this is a judgment that can only be made in light of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. "It is only by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that we can characterize religion as idolatry and self-righteousness, and in this way show it to be unbelief [*Unglaube*]."[9]

Yet even as divine revelation negates religion, it also elevates or exalts religion. The term *Aufhebung* includes both poles of this dialectic. God's self-revelation does not totally eliminate or destroy religion. Barth states, "We do not need to delete or retract anything from the admission that in His revelation God is present in the world of human religion. But what we have to discern is that this means that *God* is present."[10] God's elevation of religion comes as God's gracious activity in Jesus Christ results in the Christian religion becoming the true religion. Barth was willing to speak of Christianity as the true religion, but not because of any inherent virtue in Christianity itself. We can only speak of Christianity as the true religion in the sense in which we speak of a "justified sinner."[11] Like a sinner justified by God's grace, the empirical religion of Christianity can become the true religion insofar as it is taken up by divine grace.

Barth's rich and provocative discussion deserves more extensive treatment than can be given here. For our purposes, the critical point is that methodologically he begins from the perspective of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and in light of this all religions—including Christianity—are deficient.

This presents an important methodological issue for how we approach the study of religion: Should our understanding of religion come from careful observation of religious phenomena in the world around us? Or from God's authoritative self-revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture? Or some combination of both? The Indian theologian D. T. Niles tells of a conversation with

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9. Ibid., 314.
10. Ibid., 197.
11. Ibid., 325. In spite of Barth's strong Christocentrist understanding of revelation, he does acknowledge vestiges of divine revelation outside of Scripture, speaking of "other words" and "other lights":

> We recognize that the fact that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God does not mean that in the Bible, the Church and the world there are not other words which are quite notable in their way, other lights which are quite clear and other revelations which are quite real. . . . Nor does it follow from our statement that every word spoken outside the circle of the Bible and the Church is a word of false prophecy and therefore valueless, empty and corrupt, that all the lights which rise and shine in this outer sphere are misleading and all the revelations are necessarily untrue. (Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV/3 of *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961], 97)

Karl Barth that illustrates the issue. In light of Barth's depiction of religion as *Unglaube*, Niles once asked Barth how many Hindus he had actually met. "None," Barth responded. "How then," asked Niles, "do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?" Barth replied, "A priori!"[12] The implication seems to be that a theological assessment of religions does not require empirical observation of actual religious beliefs and practices but can be deduced solely from God's revelation.[13]

One need not agree with Barth on all points to appreciate his insistence that, as Christians, we must understand human religiosity in light of God's definitive self-revelation in Jesus Christ. A Christian theology of religions must be shaped by biblical themes. But is Scripture *all* we need for understanding religion? Or, along with Scripture, do we also need skills enabling us to understand the religious dimension of people? It depends, once again, upon what we mean by "religion," and this can be illustrated by considering the definition of religion offered by another theologian, Paul Tillich.

Tillich famously defines religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life."[14] Tillich's definition has been used widely by both theologians and religious studies scholars. He captures nicely something important about religion, for religions do address matters of ultimate concern.

But Tillich's definition is so broad that it excludes very little from the religious domain, for virtually *everyone* has an ultimate concern of some kind; thus on this view everyone is religious. This has certain theological advantages, since many theologians insist that all people, even explicit atheists, are really inherently religious whether they acknowledge this or not. In other words, no one is neutral with respect to God; each person stands in some relation to God the Creator, even if it is a relation of rebellion or denial. Even those who deny God's reality are religious in their rebellion. As Johannes Blauw says, "A man without 'religion' is a contradiction in itself. . . . Man is 'uncurably [sic] religious' because his relation to God belongs to the very essence of

12. D. T. Niles, "Karl Barth—A Personal Memory," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 10–11.

13. Although Barth's reply might suggest that he had no interest in actual religious practices, Barth was in fact well aware of other religions. In "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," Barth offers a perceptive discussion of the Pure Land tradition of Japanese Buddhism, pointing out clear parallels between aspects of Pure Land teachings and Protestant Christianity and even referring to Pure Land Buddhism as a "providential disposition." See *Word of God*, 340–44.

14. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4.

man himself. Man is only man as man-before-God."[15] Similarly, J. H. Bavinck characterizes religion as a kind of response to God's revelation: "It is possible to believe that religion by its very nature is a response. . . . In his religion man feels that he is addressed by a supernatural power, that a god reveals and manifests himself to him. Religion is the human answer to divine, or at least allegedly divine, revelation. . . . Religion is by its very nature a communion, in which man answers and reacts to God's revelation."[16] As Bavinck himself acknowledges, this perspective presupposes that God exists and has revealed himself to humankind. As a response to God's self-revelation, then, religion can be either positive or negative. "Religion can be a profound and sincere seeking of God; it can also be a flight from God, an endeavor to escape from His presence, under the guise of love and obedient service. At the bottom of it lies a relationship, an encounter."[17]

As a Christian theological perspective about human beings being created by God and living in some kind of response to their Creator and Judge, this is undoubtedly correct, though incomplete. A more comprehensive theological explanation of religion would include, in addition to revelation, the biblical themes of creation, common grace, human sin and rebellion, and the influence of the demonic realm.[18] But notice two things about this perspective. First, in providing an explicitly Christian account of human religiosity, it presupposes the truth of Christian theism. Second, on Bavinck's view religion is something that applies to *all* human beings as creatures of God. Everyone, even a person who rejects religious affiliation, is inherently religious and manifests a basic orientation toward God, either of worship or rebellion. There is an important insight here, and any theology of religions that reflects the thrust of Scripture will need to incorporate this theme.

But is this sufficient for an understanding of religions? Definitions serve particular purposes, so it is important to clarify the purpose of a proposed definition of religion. As used in ordinary discourse, the word "religion" is a term of classification; it is intended to apply to certain things but not to others. Demographers distinguish those who are religious from those who are not; the Internal Revenue Service recognizes some organizations as religious for tax purposes but not others; and we might describe Aunt Maggie as

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15. Johannes Blauw, "The Biblical View of Man in His Religion," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 32.

16. J. H. Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 18–19.

17. Ibid., 19.

18. These themes are incorporated into a theological account of religion in Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), chap. 10; and McDermott and Netland, *Trinitarian Theology of Religions*.

"devoutly religious," while we say Cousin Jimmy is "agnostic." If "religion" is being used descriptively to pick out certain realities but not others, or to refer to some ways of living as opposed to others, then Tillich's definition is not helpful, for it includes too much. Is religion a category that applies to all human beings or just to a subset of humankind?

Even if we adopt the theological point that all people—even those who explicitly deny God's reality—stand in some relation to God, there is still the empirical question of whether "religious" is a useful category for identifying some groups but not others. As we observe how people live, there is an important distinction to be made, for example, between (1) those who believe in an eternal Creator who has revealed himself to us, whether in the Bible or in the Qur'an, and who try to live in accordance with this conviction, and (2) those who believe that this life is all there is and that there is nothing beyond the physical world to which we are accountable. These are two very different ways of living and understanding reality, and we need some way to distinguish these groups. The word "religious" is useful in referring to the former group but not the latter. Here "religion" is being used in a descriptive or phenomenological sense, not in a theological sense.

Whether we should adopt a theological or a phenomenological definition of religion will depend upon the purposes of the definition. If the intent is to provide an explanation or account of religious phenomena from an explicitly Christian perspective, then a theological understanding of religion derived from Scripture and Christian theological resources is necessary. But notice that even an explicitly theological explanation presupposes the logically more basic phenomenological understanding of religion. Since a theological account provides a Christian understanding of what we observe in the religions, it is crucial that the theological definition accurately reflects actual religious beliefs and practices. An adequate theological perspective on religion requires not only faithfulness to the biblical witness but also an accurate description of the institutions, beliefs, and practices of religious people. Otherwise the theological account is misapplied. If, for example, we are to have an adequate theological account of Chinese ancestral practices, then we need not only an understanding of the relevant biblical and theological teachings but also an accurate portrayal of the practices themselves—what they are and their significance for the participants. So a theological definition of religion actually presupposes a phenomenological understanding of religion. One obtains a reliable descriptive or phenomenological perspective from careful observation of the lived realities of actual religious communities. In what follows we will be concerned primarily not with a theological account of religion but rather with an empirical, phenomenological, or descriptive understanding of religion as we encounter it among diverse human communities.

"Religion" and "World Religions"

When people in the West think about religion, it is usually in terms of the so-called world religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and perhaps Daoism and Confucianism. Some of the more popular courses in universities are those that introduce the world religions. We are so accustomed to the designation "world religions" that it might come as a surprise to learn that this is a modern category.

The first use of the English term "world religions" was in C. P. Tiele's article "Religions" in the 1885 (9th) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.[19] We commonly think of Buddhism as a world religion today, but the idea of Buddhism as a particular religion found throughout Asia developed in the early nineteenth century. Philip Almond argues that it was only in the 1820s and 1830s, with the British encounter with Asian Buddhists scattered throughout the British Empire, that Europeans came to think of the distinctive rituals, institutions, beliefs, and narratives among followers of the Buddha in various parts of Asia as comprising a single religion: Buddhism.[20] Islam was already recognized by some as a world religion, although others still thought of it simply as the religion of the Arabs. But by the early decades of the twentieth century, the idea of a half-dozen major world religions was taking hold, so that theologian Ernst Troeltsch's 1923 essay "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions" identifies Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism as "the great world religions."[21]

Tomoko Masuzawa observes that the designation "world religions" presupposes that there is something identifiable as religion, "a genus comprising many species, and that Christianity, for example, is but one of them."[22] Both the idea of world religions and the notion of a general category of religion, with many particular varieties identified as the religions of the world, are modern developments. Kim Knott states, "Scholars are generally in agreement that 'religion' is a historical and scholarly construct."[23]

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19. Tomoko Masuzawa, "World Religions," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 14:9800, 9802.

20. Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8–12.

21. Ernst Troeltsch, "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 19.

22. Masuzawa, "World Religions," 9800.

23. Kim Knott, "How to Study Religion in the Modern World," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami, and Christopher Partridge, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 16. See, e.g., Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language*

This might strike many as strange. After all, it is not as though recent scholars invented the idea that people pray, worship in churches or temples, or offer sacrifices to the spirits of ancestors. People throughout history have expressed beliefs in God or gods, have prayed and meditated, and have regarded various texts as sacred or divinely inspired. Kevin Schilbrack has helpfully delineated the "religion as a modern construct" discourse into three distinct claims. The first is that the term "religion" is a modern, social construct. "Whether or not religion has always existed, critics say, the concept *religion* is a relatively recent invention. According to them, the concept of 'a' religion as a particular system of beliefs embodied in a bounded community was largely unknown prior to the seventeenth century, and the concept of 'religion' as a generic something which different cultures (or all cultures) share was not thought until the nineteenth century."[24] The second claim is that the term "religion" distorts the cultural phenomena on which it is imposed. The term is problematic because "it is not and cannot be culturally neutral but rather carries with it connotations derived from its modern, Western, Christian origins." Rather than a category that reflects accurately the patterns found among peoples outside European Christendom, the modern concept of religion carries with it meanings derived from Christian history. And the third claim follows upon the second: the modern construction of "religion" is not an innocent activity but is ideologically motivated and "serves the purposes of modern western power."[25] The implication of the claims taken together is "that if religion is socially constructed, then religion is not a thing in the world but rather a product of the Western

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of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); S. N. Balagangadhara, *"The Heathen in His Blindness . . .": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

24. Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.4 (December 2010): 1113–14.

25. Ibid., 1115. This criticism is part of the larger critique of Orientalism and its depiction of non-Western peoples and cultures. The seminal work here is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). For Said, Orientalism signifies "the complicity between Western academic accounts of the nature of 'the Orient' and the hegemonic political agendas of Western imperialism" (83). Said's thesis was that the depiction of "the East" by modern European scholars is not the strictly objective, scientific, and factual portrayal that Western scholars presume it to be; rather, it is both inaccurate in its portrayal and serves colonialist agendas by controlling, marginalizing, and subjugating Eastern realities to the supposedly superior Western realities.

imagination. This use of language distorts what it describes and is ideologically motivated to be pejorative towards nonwestern cultures."[26]

Properly qualified, there is truth in this critique. In thinking about religion globally, we need especially to be careful about imposing meanings from European and American experiences with Christianity onto other ways of thinking and behaving. Having a sacred, authoritative text (the Bible) is central to Christianity but is not so important in some other religious traditions. Doctrines and beliefs are crucial to Christian faith but not so significant in Shinto. And it is true that some Europeans and Americans used the notion of religion, with Christianity as the highest form of religion, as a way of contrasting the supposed virtues of Christian/Western civilization with the vices of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But the issues here are complex, and the critique needs to be carefully qualified. We will focus upon the first claim about the social construction of the modern notion of religion, and I will argue that although there is an important sense in which this claim is true, it does not necessarily follow that the idea of religion is inapplicable or should be abandoned. Properly qualified, it is an important and useful category for helping us understand aspects of collective human behavior.[27]

Growing Awareness of Religious Others

The modern understanding of religion and the religions developed within the context of the emerging European awareness of two sets of binary oppositions: first, the growing distinction between Christianity (or Christendom) in Europe and "secular" domains of intellectual and social life; and second, the distinction between Christianity and what increasingly became known as "other religions." Increased awareness of difference in both cases is, of course, part of the historical narrative of the modern era, a period emerging about the sixteenth century in Europe and coinciding with the subsequent

26. Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1116.
27. "Religion" is not the only concept in the field of religious studies that is a modern construct. Peter van der Veer claims that "spirituality" also is "a modern Western concept, like 'religion,' 'magic,' and 'secularity.'" He notes that there is no equivalent term in either Sanskrit or Chinese and that "despite the ubiquitous reference to India and China (and indeed Asia) as 'spiritual,' spirituality is a modern, Western term." Like "religion," the term "spirituality" is notoriously difficult to define. Van der Veer argues that "the spiritual and the secular are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity." Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 35–36.

global expansion of European and American interests.[28] Thus, Brent Nongbri observes, "What is modern about the ideas of 'religions' and 'being religious' is the isolation and naming of some things as 'religious' and others as 'not religious.'"[29] The idea of religion as a distinctive sphere of collective human life is thus related to that of secularization, which will be considered in chapter 2.

The development of the concept of religion, and of particular religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, was part of the European (and later, American) effort to come to grips with the diverse ways of living for peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. But given the ongoing interactions between Western colonizers and colonized peoples, the concept cannot be restricted to Western discourse since it also becomes part of the intellectual currency of Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans in their efforts at self-definition. In this way the modern concept of religion is globalized. José Casanova points out the links between the modern understandings of religion with the notion of the secular and the processes of globalization. He observes that "one of the most important global trends is the globalization of the category of 'religion' itself and of the binary classification of reality, 'religious/secular,' that it entails." In other words, "'religion' as a discursive reality, indeed, as an abstract category and as a system of classifications of reality, used by modern individuals as well as by modern societies across the world, by religious as well as by secular authorities, has become an undisputable global social fact."[30]

To appreciate the modern developments, we must remind ourselves of the situation in premodern Europe. The relation between Christians and "religious others" changed from the fourth century onward, as Christianity was transformed from a small, minority sect into the dominant religion of

28. Although the modern concept of religion is primarily a product of changes within Europe and the Western encounter with Asian religious traditions, it was also shaped by developments in India, China, and Japan as these nations reacted against the challenges posed by modernization, colonialism, and Christian missions. A particularly fascinating example is found in the ways in which early modern Japan, during the Meiji Era (1867–1912), struggled with the place of religion in the new social order. Emerging from over two centuries of self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world in the 1860s, Japan launched an ambitious program of modernization, including attempts to adopt European and American patterns of distinguishing religion from civil authorities. Although by the turn of the century there was a clear alignment between the Japanese state and Shinto, there were vigorous debates in the preceding decades over the nature of religion (*shukyo*) and whether the state should be secular and kept distinct from religious traditions. See Trent E. Maxey, *The "Greatest Problem": Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State: 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

29. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 4.

30. José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62.

the empire. As institutional Christianity became increasingly identified with the social, political, and intellectual centers of power, other religious beliefs and practices were marginalized and condemned as heretical. Western European society became religiously more homogenized, and throughout the Middle Ages there was little knowledge of the enormous religious diversity in the rest the world. Medieval Europeans thought in terms of four basic religious categories—Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans—with the latter category covering everyone not included in the first three.[31] In some areas in the Middle East, there was extensive interaction between Christians and Muslims, as Muslims conquered land occupied by Christians.[32] Most European Christians, however, lived without direct acquaintance with adherents of other religions.

But everything changed for Europeans after 1492 and the ensuing voyages of discovery, as the bewildering diversity of human cultures became evident. Traditional ways of thinking were challenged as explorers, diplomats, and missionaries sent back a steady stream of reports detailing the strange habits of newly encountered peoples. With the increase of new information, efforts were made to understand and explain the ways of living of those in Africa, the Americas, India, China, and the islands of the Pacific. Early understandings of culture and religion developed out of these explanations. The idea of religion as a distinct domain of social life, and that there are significant differences among peoples' religious beliefs and practices, became widely accepted. The notion of religion developed in parallel with the idea of culture, another modern concept intended to help us understand differences among various peoples.

It is common to locate the beginning of the academic or "scientific" study of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Guy Stroumsa, however, argues persuasively that the modern study of religion actually originated in the sixteenth century and that at least three major historical events were necessary for this development. "The first was the Great Discoveries, initially of the Americas and then South and East Asia, which provided the laboratories where new categories were invented by Spanish and Italian missionaries to describe and analyze hitherto unknown phenomena." The second major event was the Renaissance, with its renewed interest in antiquity and the development of modern philology. The third "impetus for the new science" was the devastating wars of religion in Western Europe following the Reformation.

31. Eric J. Sharpe, "The Study of Religion in Historical Perspective," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 25.
32. See esp. Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

For many scholars, Catholic and Protestant, the claim of their own faith to express divine truth had lost much of its persuasive force. The violent and painful divisions of Christendom had cast doubt on the validity of Christianity itself. As anyone could see, the Turks, those followers of the "false prophet" Muhammad, showed a much more tolerant attitude toward Christian, Jewish, and sectarian "outsiders" than did Christian authorities toward "outsiders" throughout Europe. This questioning of one's own Christian faith, with its universal pretensions, was a major incentive toward the new understanding of religions as reflecting, rather than perennial truth, the values of the specific society in which they blossomed.[33]

Beginning in the sixteenth century, reports from explorers, merchants, and missionaries stimulated widespread interest in the cultural and religious practices of peoples around the world. Books and pamphlets describing the new lands were devoured by curious readers in Europe. Stroumsa states, "The newly discovered continents and cultures were slowly becoming part of the 'cultural landscape,' or what the French call the *imaginaire*, of European intellectuals. . . . This new knowledge of the diverse religions practiced around the world entailed the urgent need to redefine religion as a universal phenomenon, with a strong emphasis on ritual, rather than on beliefs."[34]

One of the more remarkable publications of this time is *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* [Religious ceremonies and customs of the peoples of the world], by Bernard Picart and Jean Frederic Bernard, published between 1723 and 1737 in seven volumes of over 3,000 pages. The book provides a sweeping survey of the religious traditions known to Europeans in the early 1700s, combining careful descriptions of practices among Jews, various Christian groups, Africans, Hindus in India, the Incas, the Japanese, Native Americans, Muslims, and others, with detailed engravings depicting such rituals by the famed engraver Bernard Picart. The book "marked a major turning point in European attitudes toward religious belief." For it

sowed the radical idea that religions could be compared on equal terms, and therefore that all religions were equally worthy of respect—and criticism. It turned belief in one unique, absolute, and God-given truth into "religion," that is, into individualized ceremonies and customs that reflected the truths relative to each people and culture. This global survey of religious practices effectively disaggregated and delimited the sacred, making it specific to time, place, and institutions. Once labeled in time and place, religion became not an

33. Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 5–6.
34. Ibid., 3.

unchanging system of beliefs but a discrete entity concerned everywhere with the gods or the heavenly.[35]

Religious Ceremonies and Customs was widely read not only by intellectuals but also by ordinary citizens curious about the new worlds.

There is some irony in the fact that religious studies as an academic discipline developed in part on the basis of the extensive reports by Christian missionaries—as well as travelers and administrators in the expanding colonialist empires—in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.[36] Early missionaries were often careful ethnographers, recording rich descriptions of the people among whom they lived and ministered. They also served as brokers between the old and new worlds, not only translating the Bible into local languages but also making available the sacred texts of other religions in European languages. But as modern religious studies became an established academic discipline within the university, the relation between it and theologians or missiologists became strained as each group regarded the other with suspicion. Religious studies scholars, as they pursued the allegedly "objective" study of religion, were especially critical of theological judgments about religious beliefs and practices made by theologians. Theologians and missiologists, in turn, rejected the reductionistic naturalism that seemed to govern religious studies. Our contemporary concept of religion is thus to some extent an innovation that emerged with the dissolution of Christendom in Europe, the growing secularization of European societies, the growing awareness of religious diversity worldwide, and the repercussions from European colonialism and Christian missionary activity in Asia.

Hinduism as a Modern Construct

The idea that religion is a modern construct is perhaps most apparent in the case of Hinduism and India. Hinduism is typically treated in textbooks as one of the major world religions. But the idea of Hinduism as a distinct religion is a modern notion that developed within the context of the encounter between India and the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scholars typically point to the role of British Orientalist scholars and administrators, missionary interest in Indian religious texts, and use of the census

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35. Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's "Religious Ceremonies of the World"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–2.

36. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 144–45.

to identify as Hindu all Indians who were not Muslim, Christian, Sikh, or Zoroastrian as encouraging the idea that Hindus comprise a distinct and cohesive religious group. Geoffrey Oddie reports, "It is now well established that the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' were categories invented by outsiders in an attempt to interpret and explain the complexities they found in Indian religious and social life."[37] The word "Hindu" was originally the Persian variant of the Sanskrit *sindhu*, referring to the Indus River. The early use of the term was primarily as a geographical concept, designating everything native to India, and it carried no particular religious significance. Thus, in the early nineteenth century, long after the arrival of the British East India Company, "it was still not uncommon for references to be made to 'Hindoo Christians' and 'Hindoo Muslims' as distinct from those who were not native-born or culturally indigenous to the subcontinent."[38]

But in the nineteenth century the term "Hindu" took on distinctively religious meanings, and "Hinduism" was introduced as a term designating India's native religion (singular). Perhaps the earliest use of "Hindoo" and "Hindooism" by a Westerner as designating a religious system was by Charles Grant in a letter in 1787.[39] The Baptist missionary William Ward in Serampore similarly spoke of "Hindooism," "the Hindoo system," and "the Hindoo superstition" in 1801.[40] Oddie suggests that the first person to use "Hinduism" to denote some kind of coherent religious system was the Indian social and religious reformer Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), who used the term in English publications in 1816.[41] The term "Hinduism" became increasingly adopted in English publications by missionaries and Indians in the 1820s and 1830s, with the former using it as a negative contrast to Christianity whereas the latter held it up as a positive alternative to the religion of British colonialists.[42]

37. See Geoffrey A. Oddie, "Constructing 'Hinduism': The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding," in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication Since 1500*, ed. Robert Eric Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 156.

38. Robert Eric Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23.3 (Winter 1993): 525.

39. Will Sweetman, "Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship," *Religion* 31 (2001): 209. I am grateful to Professor Peter Vethanayagamony for calling my attention to this essay.

40. Oddie, "Constructing 'Hinduism,'" 156–57.

41. Ibid., 162.

42. The modern construction of the concept of religion or of Hinduism as a religion was not simply a matter of Europeans and Americans imposing a concept from the outside upon Indians, Chinese, or Japanese. As van der Veer observes, "It is not possible to see the transformation of concepts like religion as the passive reception of Western categories in the rest of the world. Indians and Chinese are actively involved in this transformation, as are Europeans and Americans" (*Modern Spirit of Asia*, 29–30).

The story of this term's transformation in meaning is as fascinating as it is complex and includes the contributions of at least four distinct groups, each with its own agenda in shaping India's social, cultural, and religious identity: the British colonial administrators, some of whom were also accomplished linguists and scholars of Indian history; the Indian elite who assisted the British in administering India; Western missionaries; and Indian intellectuals who were both active in the anti-British movement for Indian independence and reformers of the ancient Brahmanic religious traditions.[43] "Hinduism" became a general category for the religious traditions of India that were not Islamic, Christian, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Jain, or Buddhist. Despite the bewildering variety of popular religious and philosophical traditions in this category, it became common to use "Hinduism" in speaking of an allegedly indigenous, "coherent, comprehensive, and unified religious system that could be compared to other systems such as Christianity and Islam."[44] Hinduism was characterized in terms of India's ancient Brahmanic traditions rooted in the Vedic scriptures and, under the influence of modern Indian intellectuals such as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) as well as those in the West captivated by images of the "exotic East," it became especially identified with the esoteric mysticism and monism of the Advaita Vedanta tradition.[45] More recently, radical nationalists associated with the *Hindutva* movement have tried to define Hinduism in terms of ancient indigenous religious traditions inextricably linked to the land of India, so that to be authentically Indian is to be Hindu. Christians and Muslims are by definition, then, not authentically Indian.[46]

Reification of Religion and the Religions

The criticism that our concept of religion is a modern social construct takes several forms, but a common theme throughout is the charge that to speak

43. See Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion"; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

44. Geoffrey A. Oddie, "Constructing 'Hinduism,'" 155.

45. See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999), chap. 6; Jyotirmaya Sharma, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

46. See "Hindutva: Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism," in *Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. Deepak Sarma (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 373–90; C. Ram-Prasad, "Contemporary Political Hinduism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 526–50.

of religion in general or about religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism is to engage in the reification of religion. "Religion" and "Hinduism" are said to be reified concepts in that they give the impression of categories with neat, clear boundaries that refer to concrete realities in the world when in fact no such entities exist. Critics claim that reification is found in the tendency to think of religion as a clearly defined, transhistorical, and transcultural category, a genus of which there are many species—such as Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. What is especially objectionable is the idea that there is a common "essence" that defines religion, so that all particular religions partake of this essence of religion.

One of the major reasons given for maintaining that our modern notion of religion is a modern construct comes from etymology. Scholars point out that the languages of the ancient world did not have terms corresponding to the meaning of "religion" today, nor did they have terms denoting distinct religions such as Hinduism or Judaism or Buddhism.[47] For example, ancient Greek and Latin did not have single terms that carried the same meanings as the English word "religion" does today. "Religion" is often said to be derived from the Latin *religio* or *religari*, but neither word carried the same meaning as "religion" does today. There was no Greek equivalent for the Latin *religio*.[48]

Until the modern era, moreover, non-Western languages generally have not had equivalent words for the English term "religion." Eric Sharpe states, "In recent years, where non-western traditions have thought in 'religious' terms, they have done so through the medium of some European language. A Hindu writing in English may be happy enough to speak of 'religion': in Sanskrit, Hindi, or Tamil he must use words having a different connotation."[49] The Sanskrit term normally used in these contexts is "dharma," which can be translated into English as "truth," "duty," "law," "order," or "right." Similarly, the Japanese term for "religion" today is *shukyo*, but it was only around 1873 that it was adopted as the Japanese translation for "religion."[50] *Shukyo* is a modern term, influenced by late nineteenth-century debates over the "scientific" study of religion in Europe and America, and it carries connotations somewhat foreign to traditional Japanese approaches to religious practices.

47. See esp. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, chaps. 2–4.
48. On developments in meaning of *religio*, see Peter Henrici, "The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher," in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1–20.
49. Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 39.
50. Robert Kisala, "Japanese Religions," *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, ed. Paul L. Swanson and Clark Chilson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 4.

> [*Shukyo*] is a derived word that came into prominence in the nineteenth century as a result of Japanese encounters with the West and particularly with Christian missionaries, to denote a concept and view of religion commonplace in the realm of nineteenth-century Christian theology but at that time not found in Japan, of religion as a specific, belief-framed entity. The term *shukyo*, thus, in origin at least, implies a separation of that which is religious from other aspects of society and culture, and contains implications of belief and commitment to one order or movement—something that has not been traditionally a common factor in Japanese religious behaviour and something that tends to exclude many of the phenomena involved in the Japanese religious process.[51]

According to Jason Josephson, the Japanese term *shukyo* was then exported to China and Korea and translated into Chinese and Korean, with the result that "Japanese interpretations of 'religion' influenced the conceptual reorganization of national traditions across the region."[52] Anna Sun notes that "the [Chinese] term *jiao* did not acquire its current usage as 'religion' until the turn of the twentieth century."[53] The term had been used as early as the ninth century in *sanjiao* (three teachings) to refer to Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist teachings, but there it has the meaning of teachings and not of religion as we use the term today.

One of the most significant early works calling for rethinking our modern understanding of "religion" and "the religions" is Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962).[54] Smith, a historian and Islamicist, argues that the notion of "religion" as a distinct entity—and especially of "the religions" (plural)—is a modern confusion that ought to be abandoned. He states, for example, "There are Hindus but there is no Hinduism."[55] Smith was especially concerned to refute the notion that specific religions are distinct, abstract entities with unchanging essences that somehow exist apart from the internal faith commitments of religious individuals. "Neither religion in general nor any one of the religions, I will contend, is in itself an intelligible entity, a valid object of inquiry or of concern either for the scholar or for the man of faith."[56] Smith is not denying that there are identifiable religious rituals and beliefs characterizing particular communities and that there are important differences among religious groups. But what he does reject is the idea that

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51. Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 13–14.
52. Josephson, *Invention of Religion in Japan*, x (see also 7). See also Jun'ichi Isomae, "Deconstructing 'Japanese Religion,'" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32.2 (2005): 235–48.
53. Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 23.
54. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
55. Ibid., 65.
56. Ibid., 12.

there is an unchanging essence of Hinduism as a religion and especially that this consists in certain beliefs or doctrines.

Smith makes an important distinction between what he calls the external "cumulative tradition" of particular religious communities and the inner faith of individual adherents.[57] The cumulative tradition is formed over time and includes religious buildings, sacred scriptures, doctrines, moral codes, rituals, legal and social institutions, in short, "anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe."[58] It is significant that Smith includes religious beliefs as part of the cumulative tradition.

Although most people emphasize the cumulative tradition, Smith argues that far more important is the inner faith of religious individuals. Faith, for Smith, is logically prior to beliefs and is an intensely personal disposition to follow God that finds expression within the broader life of a religious community. Thus Smith speaks of faith as "that propensity of man that across the centuries and across the world has given rise to and has been nurtured by a prodigious variety of religious forms, and yet has remained elusive and personal, prior to and beyond the forms."[59] Smith contends that when most people think about religion in general or about a particular religion, what they have in mind is the external cumulative tradition rather than the inner faith of religious persons. To speak of religion as a generic category, or of Hinduism or Christianity as species of this general concept, is to reify or essentialize what is really an intensely personal faith experience of individuals.

Smith's call for us to observe carefully the actual commitments of religious believers and not to be misled by abstract systems is an important reminder. There are no religions apart from actual religious communities. But in emphasizing this, Smith draws too sharp a distinction between the inner faith of religious believers and the external cumulative tradition, which has only secondary status. What Smith calls the cumulative tradition (including beliefs) is integral to a religious community's self-understanding and cannot so easily be divorced from the believers' inner "faith disposition."

Social Construction of What?

How should we respond to the claim that our understanding of religion is a modern construct and therefore is misleading or inappropriate? There is

57. Ibid., 194.
58. Ibid., 156–57.
59. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3.

no question that the notion of religion, as the term is used today, is to some extent a modern intellectual construct that has developed through the interactions between Europeans and Americans with diverse peoples of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Furthermore, critics correctly point out that the concept can be used in misleading and unhelpful ways. But it hardly follows from this that the concept of religion itself is mistaken and should be abandoned. The academic landscape is full of concepts that were developed in modern times but help us better understand basic features of the world. As Schilbrack observes, "Despite social constructionist arguments about the invention of the concept of religion, one can legitimately use the term 'religions' to refer to certain kinds of social patterns that exist in the world."[60]

The concept of religion is socially constructed in the sense that its meaning is derived from and dependent upon human behavior and social interactions. The referent of the term is what Schilbrack calls "socially dependent facts," or states of affairs whose existence depends upon human behavior. "The existence of religion is clearly a socially dependent fact: it would not exist if there were no people."[61] What the concept of religion refers to—particular beliefs, practices, and social institutions—are socially constructed in the sense that they develop as human beings interact with each other and try to make sense of human experience and the world. But they are objective realities in that they are not *simply* the products of religious studies scholars' imaginations; they are also "out there" in the world, part of the "stuff" of reality, as are other socially dependent facts (e.g., baseball games, political elections, national holidays, free-market capitalism).

> To show that a concept is a social construction says nothing about whether or not that concept identifies something real. The concept of "molecule" and "magnetic field" are socially constructed, but this alone does not show that the entities so labeled are chimerical. Or, to take cultural examples, "gender" and "sexism" and even "colonialism" and "imperialism" are social constructions, but nevertheless indicate social realities that exist in the world.[62]

Critics charge that use of "religion" or "Hinduism" is reification, that is, treating something as an abstraction, or a bounded, static reality existing apart from the diverse, changing particularities in the actual world. Similarly, use of "religion" is said to be essentialist in that it assumes the existence of a common core or essence to religion that is shared by every particular religion.

60. Kevin Schilbrack, "What *Isn't* Religion?," *Journal of Religion* 93.3 (July 2013): 292.
61. Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1118.
62. Ibid., 1121.

While one must be careful not to impose greater homogeneity on the religious phenomena than is warranted, there is nothing in the concept of religion itself that requires such distortion. Later I will suggest a way of characterizing religion without resorting to an essentialist definition.

Moreover, we should not read too much into the fact that, before the modern era, many languages did not have a particular term corresponding to the English word "religion." Brent Nongbri makes a crucial distinction between having a word in a given language and users of that language having a particular concept: "Does the absence of a word or phrase equivalent to 'religion' in a given language mean that the speakers of the language also lack the *concept* of religion?"[63] Similarly, lack of single terms in two languages that have the same meanings does not entail that speakers of these languages do not share similar understandings on a particular subject. There is no single term in Hebrew or Greek that is identical in meaning to the English word "sin." The word "sin" is used to translate a variety of terms in Hebrew and Greek, but we should not conclude from this that the concept of sin is (merely) a construct of the English-speaking world or that those in biblical times could not understand what speakers of English mean by the word "sin."[64]

Similarly, people who did not have special terms in their languages equivalent to the English word "religion" nevertheless were able to participate in activities and to hold beliefs and values that today are included in the category of religion. The lack of a particular word equivalent to the English term "religion" does not necessarily indicate that what we mean by "religion" was absent in a given society or that people of that society could not comprehend what we mean today by the term. The absence of single terms for "religion" or "Hinduism" in fourteenth-century India, for example, does not mean that there were no particular rituals, institutions, or beliefs of the time that we today would identify as religious—or that people at that time were unable to distinguish what we today call Hindus from other groups. Those who worshiped Vishnu, believed in reincarnation, and maintained strict caste distinctions were different—and were treated differently—from those who prayed to Allah and regarded Muhammad as the final and greatest prophet. This is not simply a matter of modern outsiders making certain anachronistic judgments about

63. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 23.
64. See the incisive essay by Robert Priest, "'Experience-Near Theologizing' in Diverse Human Contexts," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 180–95. Through an analysis of the moral discourse of the Aguaruna of Peru, Priest illustrates how even though a particular language may not have a single term that corresponds precisely in meaning to the English word "sin," it can have a rich vocabulary for depicting moral failure and thus be fully adequate in capturing the range of biblical meanings brought together in the English word "sin."

earlier Indian communities. These differences were acknowledged by insiders of what we today call Hinduism and Islam.

Insiders to particular religious communities regularly make judgments about other groups, carefully distinguishing their own community and tradition from those that are alien. It is true that the religious and intellectual landscape of India has been remarkably eclectic and syncretistic, so that diverse traditions have coexisted over centuries. Yet, even in ancient times, the boundaries between those who today are known as Hindus and the early Buddhists and Jains were clear. The former regarded the latter two groups as sufficiently different that, in spite of certain similarities, the followers of the Buddha and of Mahavira (the founder of Jainism) were rejected by the Brahmins. In ancient India there was a clear distinction between those who accepted the authority of the Vedas and those who did not, with the latter being rejected as heretics by the Brahmins.[65] Accordingly, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism developed over time as three distinct religions.

The fact that "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" are to some extent modern constructs does not necessarily mean that such concepts are *merely* constructions. The issue here is whether the concepts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so forth are helpful categories for understanding and sorting out the lived realities of particular communities. Properly understood, I think they are. While not without problems, the concept of religion is important for making sense of significant aspects of collective human life. If we reject "religion" or "Hinduism" or "Christianity" as inappropriate, we will simply need to come up with new words to denote the distinct communities and religious traditions to which these terms have customarily referred.

On Defining "Religion"

What, then, do we mean when we speak of religion? Our concern here is not primarily with a theological explanation of religion but rather with a phenomenological definition that depicts the religious realities in our world. The difficulty with definitions of religion is one of inclusion and exclusion: just what is to be included and what excluded by the concept? Coming up with the necessary and sufficient conditions for something being identified as "religion" is notoriously challenging, but we should not be misled by this. As Joshua Thurow reminds us, "Lots of important concepts are very difficult to

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65. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "The Origin of Heresy in Hindu Mythology," *History of Religions* 10.4 (1971): 272.

define, but nevertheless we manage to get on quite well conversing with them and studying their referents."[66] Consider, for starters, the difficulty of defining the terms "meaning," "knowledge," "justice," or "beauty."

Scholars typically distinguish functional definitions from substantive definitions of religion. Functional definitions define religion in terms of what religious beliefs, practices, or institutions do for participants (provide social cohesion or sense of identity), whereas substantive definitions focus on things that all religions are said to have in common (belief in gods/spirits, sacred rituals). Functional definitions tend to be so broad that they exclude little from the religious domain, whereas the difficulty with substantive definitions is identifying a set of characteristics that all examples of religion share. Each approach has important insights, and Kevin Schilbrack helpfully observes that a satisfactory definition should include both functional and substantive elements.[67]

It is best not to expect that an acceptable definition will identify essential qualities found in all instances of religion. In his influential work *An Interpretation of Religion*, John Hick suggests that we draw upon the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's insights regarding "family-resemblance" concepts in determining the meaning of "religion."[68] In a now-classic discussion of the word "game," Wittgenstein pointed out that there is no single feature shared by all games and no one definition that captures all meanings of "game" in its many uses.[69] Yet the diverse meanings of "game" do bear some resemblance to each other. Despite some differences in meaning, there is a network of similarities among the many uses of "game," not unlike the resemblances among members of a natural family, so that we can recognize some relationships among the denotations of the term in various contexts. Similarly, although there may not be one property shared by all religions, there are sufficient similarities among particular cases such that it makes sense to speak of Theravada Buddhism, Protestant Christianity, Mormonism, Vedanta Hinduism, and Shia Islam—to name just a few examples—as religions. There are certain overlapping patterns and sufficiently common features so that applying the term "religion" to them makes sense.

William Cavanaugh objects to Hick's family-resemblance characterization of religion because he claims that it still includes the idea of identifying

66. Joshua C. Thurow, "Religion, 'Religion,' and Tolerance," in *Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict*, ed. Steve Clarke, Russell Powell, and Julian Savulescu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 155.

67. Schilbrack, "What *Isn't* Religion?," 295–98.

68. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 3–5.

69. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 31, sec. 66.

essential features of religion and thus "would be to return to the essentialism that the family-resemblance theory is meant to escape."[70] But Thurow correctly points out that the family-resemblance characterization does not rely on there being necessary properties defining the essence of religion that all religions must have. The idea is rather that there is "a set of core features" that collectively differentiate religion; while not all religions will manifest all of the features, the presence of a sufficient number or degree of these features identifies something as a religion.[71]

What might some of these core features be? Keith Yandell draws attention to the fact that one feature of the world religions is their analysis of our current state in terms of diagnosis and cure: "A religion proposes a *diagnosis* (an account of what it takes the basic problem facing human beings to be) and a *cure* (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem)."[72] While this clearly fits world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, it is less clear that it fits a religion such as Shinto.

Based on common characteristics of what we typically regard as religions, Ninian Smart, one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century religious studies, argues that religions include seven distinct dimensions.[73] (1) The *ritual* dimension involves ordered actions (prayer, meditation, almsgiving, funerals, marriage ceremonies) that carry significant meaning within the religious community. Another is (2) the *mythological* or *narrative* dimension. Religions typically include rich narratives about significant figures who model appropriate behavior, or stories about the origin of the cosmos or how the current state of affairs came to be. Most religions also supply (3) the *doctrinal* or *philosophical* dimension. Doctrines can be thought of as systematic attempts to clarify and integrate the central beliefs of a religious tradition.

Religions characteristically have much to say about moral values and principles, resulting in (4) the *ethical* dimension. (5) The *social* and *institutional dimension* reflects patterns and mores dictating desirable relationships among believers in the religious community, as well as the institutions that provide necessary structure to the tradition. (6) The *experiential dimension* involves

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70. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

71. Thurow, "Religion, 'Religion,' and Tolerance," 156.

72. Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 17, with original emphasis. Our focus in this chapter is on the major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. A somewhat different set of issues concerns indigenous or tribal religious traditions, or religious traditions among nonliterate communities.

73. See Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11–22; idem, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995).

participation of the religious believer in the patterns of the religious tradition through worship, prayer, meditation, pilgrimage, and so forth. Finally, (7) the *material dimension* refers to the many visible or material objects—religious art, icons, buildings, gardens, instruments to help in worship, and the like—important for the practice of religion. Smart's multidimensional approach to the study of religions helps us to appreciate the complex, integrated nature of religions.

Not all religions place the same significance on each of the dimensions. Doctrines, for example, are very important in Christianity and Islam but relatively insignificant in Shinto, which emphasizes ritual. The seven dimensions should not be regarded as exhaustive. In *Dimensions of the Sacred*, Smart adds the political and economic dimensions to the seven earlier dimensions of religion.[74] For not only do the major religions have internal mechanisms for determining legitimate exercise of power or authority, but they also have political implications globally for those outside the religion. Moreover, any understanding of religion in the past three centuries must include the complex relation between religion and nationalism, for often modern nationalism has a religious component.[75] What Yandell and Smart have identified serve as core features of religion: when these are present in sufficient measure, we identify something as a religion.

We will briefly consider two definitions of religion that build upon the core features identified above. Roger Schmidt defines religions as "systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, a community of faith, and a worldview that articulate a view of the sacred and of what ultimately matters."[76] Religions thus involve complex, integrative systems of meaning that are rooted in particular understandings of what is ultimately real and significant. For theistic religions, what is of ultimate significance is God, and everything else derives its significance in relation to God. Nontheistic religions ascribe ultimate significance to a particular state (nirvana or sunyata [emptiness] in Buddhism) or cosmic principle or reality (the Dao in Daoism).

According to the sociologist of religion Fenggang Yang, "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices about life and the world relative to the supernatural that unite the believers or followers into a social organization or moral community."[77] Yang maintains that there are four essential elements

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74. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 10.

75. A related subject is what Robert Bellah terms civil religion. See Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1–21.

76. Roger Schmidt et al., *Patterns of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 10.

77. Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.

of a religion: "(1) a belief in the supernatural; (2) a set of beliefs regarding life and the world; (3) a set of ritual practices manifesting the beliefs; and (4) a distinct social organization or moral community of the believers and practitioners."[78] What especially sets a religion apart from other systems of social organization is the first element, belief in the supernatural. This need not be belief in God, in many gods, or even belief in supernatural beings as such. The supernatural can include special powers or forces that transcend the space-time world accessible to the five senses. Religions typically include belief that reality includes more than simply the world of the senses and that our existence involves more than simply life in this world.

The understanding of religion being developed here is one that emphasizes the social and communal component of religious life.[79] Religions are not abstract systems; they find concrete expression in specific communities of people who try to live out the values and ideals of the religion. A religion calls for a distinctive way of life, and adherents in good standing within the religion are expected to conform to the established ideals. Religion thus provides an interpretive matrix within which particular groups of people understand themselves and what they regard as truly ultimate, and order their lives accordingly.

The notion of "boundaries" is critical to religious communities. Christians are considered distinct from Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, and Protestant Pentecostals are regarded as different from Russian Orthodox Christians. Although it is common to treat religious boundaries as fixed and inviolable, David Vishanoff reminds us that religious boundaries are in part "imagined constructs" that serve particular purposes and that distinguish religious communities in terms of their perceived differences by obscuring other ways in which the communities are alike.[80] Ethnicity, nationality, language, practices (dietary restrictions, prayer rituals, clothing, marriage expectations), beliefs, sacred texts, and sacred space can all contribute to constructing boundaries between communities and establishing or reinforcing religious identities. But differences between communities occur within a broader context of shared beliefs and practices, so that what are regarded as distinct religions often have a great deal in common (Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist communities in India, for

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78. Ibid.

79. This contrasts sharply with William James's highly individualistic view of religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1936 [1902]), 31–32.

80. David R. Vishanoff, "Boundaries and Encounters," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 341–64.

example, share certain beliefs and practices). Moreover, boundaries can be fluid and change, as both individuals and communities negotiate boundaries, so that what once were markers of difference between religious groups can later be signs of commonality.

In what follows we will adopt the characteristics and definitions of Yandell, Smart, Schmidt, and Yang as capturing what we mean by "religion."

This way of thinking about religion is helpful in considering world religions such as Christianity and Islam, as well as smaller and newer religions such as Baha'i and Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan. But some cases are less clear. In the mid-twentieth century there was considerable debate over whether Marxism or Communism should be understood as a religion. Ninian Smart is well aware that if one adopts the seven dimensions of religion he proposes, then a seemingly good case could be made for including Marxism, secular humanism, or even forms of nationalism as religions.[81] There have been ongoing disputes over whether Confucianism is a religion or a social or ethical philosophy. Anna Sun discusses four distinct periods since the sixteenth century, including 2000–2004, when Chinese scholars and others engaged in vigorous debate over whether Confucianism is a religion.[82] Disputes over what is to be included as religious continue today. Is Scientology a religion? How about Transcendental Meditation? Secular humanism?

The family-resemblance view of religion and the core features identified above allow for some messiness and disagreement on boundary cases. It is helpful to think of a continuum along which we have possible instances of religion, with clear paradigm cases of religions at one end and clear cases of what are not religions at the other. In between there can be cases that are less clear. Along these lines, Yang has proposed a classification of religions depending upon the extent to which a particular case exemplifies all four elements that he regards as central to religion.[83] The cases that clearly have all four are full religions. Those with significantly less of one or more of the elements are called semireligions. Quasi religions are cases such as civil religion or ancestral practices, in which the four elements are diffused and the beliefs and practices are embedded in other institutions so that they do not exist as part of a stand-alone organization or system. Cases that lack belief in the supernatural, yet share with religions the other elements, are called pseudoreligions. One need

81. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, 10–26; idem, *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 208–37; idem, *Concept and Empathy: Essays in the Study of Religion*, ed. Donald Wiebe (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 143–53.

82. Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion*, 17–93.

83. Yang, *Religion in China*, 36–43.

not agree completely with Yang's classification in order to see that there are ways in which ambiguous boundary cases can be handled.

Worldviews

As cited above, Schmidt defines religions as "systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, a community of faith, and a *worldview* that articulate a view of the sacred and of what ultimately matters."[84] He seems to suggest that each religion has a worldview, and this reflects much common discourse about religions. We often speak, for example, of the Christian worldview as compared with the Buddhist worldview, and in doing so we usually are contrasting Christian beliefs with Buddhist beliefs. This makes sense, for beliefs or doctrines are important to religions. As Ninian Smart observes, "The world religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality, through a coherent system of doctrines."[85] Thus one of Smart's dimensions of religions is the philosophical or doctrinal dimension. Religious practices grow out of implicit or explicit truth claims about reality; as Schilbrack puts it, "Religious communities understand their practices and the values they teach as in accord with the nature of things."[86] Yang also gives prominence to the place of belief in his definition of religion. Focus upon beliefs naturally leads to the idea of a comprehensive perspective or worldview, and comparing religions can include assessing the worldviews embedded within the religions. It is tempting, then, to think of a worldview as simply a comprehensive set of beliefs, or, as Ronald Nash puts it, "a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality."[87] The title of Nash's book—*Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*—reflects a popular way of thinking about religions: they are collections of beliefs or doctrines, and comparing Christianity and Buddhism is just a matter of examining their respective doctrines.

The notion of worldview is important for the study of religion, but it is a messy and contested concept and needs to be treated carefully.[88] Beliefs or

84. Schmidt et al., *Patterns of Religion*, 10, with emphasis added.
85. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 5.
86. Schilbrack, "What *Isn't* Religion?," 304.
87. Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 16.
88. For a helpful overview of ways in which the concept of worldview has been used in the West in the modern era, especially among theologians and some philosophers, see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

doctrines are important in Christianity, and so Christians often give priority to religious teachings or doctrines when thinking about religions. But, as we have seen, doctrines comprise just one aspect of religions. Thus we should not think of worldviews as merely sets of beliefs, nor should we give undue emphasis to worldviews in understanding religions.

In the late twentieth century, Christian missiologists looked to the concept of worldview to help explain cultural differences, so that diverse cultures were distinguished in terms of their respective worldviews. But worldviews include more than merely beliefs. Cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert thus developed a sophisticated understanding of worldview that includes more than just the cognitive dimensions of culture. While acknowledging the importance of beliefs, Hiebert also emphasizes the affective or moral dimensions such that worldviews include values and basic commitments about proper conduct. For Hiebert, a worldview is "the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives." A worldview "encompasses people's images or maps of the reality of all things that they use for living their lives."[89]

Ninian Smart also makes use of the concept of worldview and, like Hiebert, he insists that worldview be thought of not simply in terms of beliefs but also in relation to the seven dimensions that he outlines for understanding religions. Smart's use of worldview helps him to address the problem of ambiguous cases in determining the boundaries for religion. Earlier we observed that it can be difficult to determine whether something like Confucianism or Marxism is a religion. Smart uses the concept of worldview to set that question aside and to broaden the discussion, so that regardless of whether we call Marxism a religion, we can compare Marxism with religions such as Christianity or Buddhism by analyzing their respective worldviews. Smart argues that religions should be regarded as a subset of a broader category of worldviews, ideologies, or world philosophies. The study of religions should be part of a broader comparative inquiry, which Smart calls "worldview analysis."[90]

This has two advantages. First, without necessarily resolving the question of whether Marxism or Confucianism is a religion, it enables us to compare such systems with religions such as Christianity or Islam, noticing similarities and differences. Second, worldview analysis facilitates discussion of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese intellectual traditions that defy neat classification as

89. Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 25–26.

90. See, e.g., Ninian Smart, *Worldviews*; idem, *World Philosophies*, ed. Oliver Leaman, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008 [2000]); idem, *Beyond Ideology*.

either religious or philosophical. In Western universities one typically studies Buddhism in the religious studies department rather than the philosophy department, whereas many Buddhist intellectuals insist that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion. Focus upon worldview analysis, rather than trying to determine whether Buddhist teachings are "really" religious or philosophical, allows for inclusion of the views of Buddhist thinkers such as Nagarjuna or Dogen along with other philosophers such as Wittgenstein or Hume in comparative analysis.

Although the notion of worldview is important for understanding religions, we should not expect worldviews to be unrealistically tidy, coherent, or systematic. If we are considering the worldviews of actual religious communities, we should not be surprised to find them imprecise, often unclear, and not completely consistent. Moreover, worldviews can apply either to individuals or to larger groups, resulting again in some messiness and ambiguity. Each individual can be said to have a worldview, and in most cases these are implicit and not carefully thought through. So each Buddhist, for example, can be said to have a particular worldview. While we would expect some significant similarities among the worldviews of a group of Buddhists (such as Theravada Buddhists in Bangkok in 2010), we should also not be surprised by clear differences as well. People are different: even among those who profess the same religious affiliation, there can be pronounced differences and even inconsistencies. This is especially the case when we are considering people who may be from the same religious group but have different ethnic, class, or cultural locations.

Culture(s)

From our discussion to this point, it is clear that religions are closely related to cultures. But although they are related concepts, religion and culture are distinct: neither can be reduced to the other. Failure to appreciate both the close relation and the differences between religion and culture can result in confusion.

What do we mean by "culture"? The concept of culture, like that of religion, is modern. This does not mean that what the term "culture" denotes did not exist before the modern era. As far back as history takes us, people have lived together in communities in patterned, ordered ways characterized by different languages, beliefs, institutions, and customs. Although they may not have had our modern understanding of culture, ancient peoples were very much aware of differences among peoples in these areas. Within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the notion of culture became widely adopted as a way of explaining these differences.