

# HEURISTICS



## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

What is religion? Does this question call for a definition of religion that allows us to identify it and provide ways for distinguishing religion from what is not religion? Many people would say no. Given that there are so many kinds of religion, perspectives on religion, disciplines studying religion, public voices reporting on religion, and feelings of religious people, would it not be better simply to not raise the question? We can say that there are family resemblances among many things that are called religious and leave it at that. There is no reason to define religion, as if it had an essence distinct from and related to other things, so long as we can keep moving and talking about religious matters as the conversations unfold. This is a heuristic argument, claiming that inquiry would be better served by not raising the question of how to define religion.

The claim in these essays, however, is that the heuristic case is just the opposite: inquiry proceeds more fruitfully by defining religion a certain way. The nature of definition, however, is a complicated problem in itself. Everyone knows what religion is, and yet there are huge disagreements. Furthermore, religion is not like an Aristotelian substance that can be defined in a genus/species classification system. Rather it is a harmony of many different aspects of reality. The definition to be put forward is that religion is the human engagement of ultimacy, which requires harmonizing semiotic cultural systems, aesthetic achievements, social institutions with their own dynamics, and psychological structures, along with intentional relations with what is ultimate. All these things can be present, but not harmonized so that something ultimate is engaged. Chapter 1 explores some of the problems of definition.

How can a definition of religion be understood? This requires an explication of basic notions, for instance, ultimacy, ontological creativity,

universal traits of existence, their human bearings, and so forth. Chapter 2 provides a formulaic definition of religion and begins the explication of its basic notions.

How can we understand what is involved in religion, defined in accordance with the hypothesis proposed here? That requires a theory of religion, expanding on the definition. The initial presentation of such a theory is the topic of chapter 3. Chapter 4 continues that presentation, deepening the introductory discussions.

All the arguments in the chapters of this part are intended to be hypotheses about religion that are presented as heuristically good ways forward. The hypotheses are not deductive, but are speculative nets that need to prove their worth by how neatly they allow religious phenomena to be identified and connected, and how they allow religion to be distinguished from things that are not religious.

Part of religion as the engagement of ultimacy is religious experience. But religious experience is only a part, not the whole of religion. Religious experience is the main topic of part 2 of this volume.

## Chapter 1

# PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION



## CONFUSIONS OF DEFINITION

For some people, religion means a spiritual path. For some people, religion means a community of practice and belief within which members live out a spiritual path. For some people, religion means a set of beliefs about ultimate things, whatever ultimacy is construed to be. For some people, religion means belief in supernatural beings, whether or not they are ultimate. For some people, religion means a tradition of beliefs and practices with a special vocabulary and a history of development and definition over against other traditions. For some people, religion means a rich evolving culture whose images and institutions prompt great literature, music, dance, architecture, and art.

For some people, religions mean ingroups, often ethnically based, with markers of behavior, institutions, beliefs, and gut feelings of propriety and impropriety, distinguishing themselves from outgroups. For some people, religions mean cultural and institutional systems within a larger society that identify themselves in religious terms. For some people, religions mean political forces representing the beliefs, attitudes, and moral programs of such religiously identified social systems. For some people, religion means moral leadership for change in a larger society. For some people, religion means leadership in opposing change that would weaken a prized cultural and institutional system. For some people, especially in the media, religions mean denominationally named social groups that have political agendas and organized activities.

For some people, religion means an interior, individual, search for meaning and fulfillment. Religion means an affair of the heart, whether this involves approaching God, realizing identity with Brahman, entering into harmony with the Dao, or some other orientation to what is of

ultimate concern. For some people, religion means extraordinary experience, transformative, wild, or mind-blowing experience, something sharply contrasting with quotidian experience. For some people, religious experience merges with the erotic and excessive. From these perspectives, membership in religious groups, participation in religious movements, and cultural conditions and contributions are of secondary importance. Sometimes the ecstatic experiences are communal, however.

For some people, religion is one of the great engines of civilization. The Axial Age religions in their various ways developed conceptions of the cosmos as a whole, of the fundamental sources of things being one or few and hence of the interrelatedness of the world, of the greater importance in certain circumstances of one's humanity than of one's tribal or kinship membership, of the recognition of all people as among one's extended kin, of the need to be just and compassionate to all, not only those within one's ingroup, and of the greater virtue of achieving peace than victory. The world's civilizations are still trying to live in to these high religious ideals that have been laid down on fractious ingroups of ethnic, tribal, and cultural factions.

For some people, religion is one of the most mischievous forces in a world struggling to survive with peace and prosperity because religion means loyalty to one's ingroup. Religion fuels denominational wars among factions in Islam today as it did among Christian denominations in centuries past. The struggles about the effects of European colonialism are fashioned in religious terms pitting Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and African tribal religions against one another. Religious groups that feel threatened become fundamentalistic, exaggerating ingroup-outgroup boundary conflicts. Religions sometimes reject reason, scientific inquiry, and good counsel in favor of some inappropriate authority. Despite the veneer of universal compassion, many self-proclaimed religious people are bigoted, nasty, and profoundly disrespectful of people outside of their ingroup, and this is what religion means to some people.

For some people, religion is to be identified with popular folk expressions in festivals and local celebrations, in popular scientific views about supernatural beings, magical causal principles, and superstitious interpretations of the circumstances of life. For some people, all those popular folk practices really are manifestations of much deeper and more sophisticated religious engagements. For some people, religion is to be identified with the most sophisticated teachings of the great founders such as Confucius, the Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, and St. Paul, as interpreted in the great

commentarial and theological traditions; for many of these people, the folk expressions of religion are the compromises made when the great religious traditions are embodied in local folk cultures.

“Some people” in the preceding examples of what religion means usually refers to particular perspectives on some aspect or role of religion, and a given individual can occupy many or perhaps all of the perspectives at some time or other. Religion means many more things than are mentioned, of course, but all of these mentioned are recognizable meanings in common public and scholarly discourse. Even if we personally reject some of those meanings as illegitimate, mistaken, or reductive, we know what people are talking about when they use the word “religion” in any of these ways. But it is confusing when religion has so many meanings, often contradictory to one another.

It might be tempting to follow the lead of some postmodernists and reject the whole idea of “religion” as a colonialist imposition of a Western conception on a global array of cultures whose social organization might be very different from the West’s. “Religion,” for these postmodernists, has validity only when referring to Western religious denominations, especially Protestant ones, and its wider application distorts other cultures.

Our first response to the postmodern criticism of the idea of “religion,” of course, should be to amend our understanding of religion so that it does not distort other cultures. Most of us know, for instance, that it is a mistake to define religion exclusively as worship of a supreme personal deity, however common that assumption has been in the recent past in America. When monotheistic European colonialists encountered cultures with swarms of gods, sometimes with none of them regarded as supreme, the first reaction was often to regard these cultures as deficient because not monotheistic. The second response was to hunt for some deep analogue to a supreme deity, as Matteo Ricci did in China with his focus on Shangdi, even when the analogue was not particularly important. The third response has been to reconsider the whole nature of the object of worship as involving different metaphorical systems. The West Asian religions (including Europe as West Asian) developed personifying metaphors, elaborating the notion of the person as ultimate. The South Asian religions, including the many kinds of Buddhism and Hinduism, developed the root metaphor of consciousness for the various conceptions of ultimacy and regarded personified deities as subject to karma. The East Asian religions developed the metaphors of spontaneous emergence and harmony for the ultimate realities. As we come to have more comprehensive and less biased

views of these theological constructions, we can observe their interactions over the millennia but also their important differences with only local priorities of one over the others. Paul Tillich taught us to speak of “ultimate reality” instead of God and to have an extremely capacious view of what might count as ultimate; he himself, though a Christian theologian, was dead set against thinking of God or ultimate reality as “a being” of any sort, much less a personal being.

Tillich also recognized that “worship” should not be confined to liturgical practices. Like the ancient “prophets” who thundered against hollow, hypocritical, inauthentic participation in religious rituals, he regarded institutional religious life as suspect and looked to other areas of life for what he called the “depth dimension.” Instead of worship, he suggested we think of “ultimate concern,” however that is worked out existentially. At the same time, we have come to regard at least some instances of religious rituals as much more than vehicles of worship or the expression of ultimate concern. Rather, as in Purva Mimamsa and Levitical Judaism, they are ontological practices that are taken to constitute the world in some sense and bring it to right order. Regarding rituals mainly as vehicles for worship or expressing ultimate concern is a locally Protestant perspective.

In these and many other ways, our understanding of religion has been correcting its biases for the last three centuries and continues to do so. The basic languages for religious expressions have been studied for their underlying commitments. Translations have been made of an increasing array of religious texts and historical representations of religion. A comparative base for religion and theology is now often presupposed even by postmodern scholars who disapprove of such large theories. And the scholarly world now includes representatives of all the world’s cultures, not just the European and American. Although the scholarly study of religion and the broader intellectual understanding of it may never be free from bias, self-consciousness about bias and the concern for self-correction of bias have made our reflections on religion generally vulnerable to correction. This is our proper first response to the postmodern suggestion that we abandon the category of religion.

The second is to look at the history of the category itself. “Religion” derives from the Latin *religio*. Cicero thought the word came from *re-lego*, where *lego* meant considering and *relego* meant considering over again. Lactantius, a third-century Christian writer, followed by Augustine, thought it came from *re-ligo*, where *ligo* meant binding together. Its main meaning in the ancient Roman world was the scrupulous, conscientious,

strict observance of the services owed to the gods or to God. It meant taking the cults and their observance seriously, or as we might say “religiously.” Thus, the study of religion as the Romans might have practiced it would be the study of the nature of cults worshipping or serving the gods, and how people are or should be deeply invested in that.

For Thomas Aquinas, *religio* was the duty owed to God. All people, he thought, originally had a natural knowledge of God and an impulse to worship and love God. But this natural inclination to *religio* was distorted by original sin and, hence, needs to be supplemented by revealed faith, which only Christians have, according to him. Whereas religion is natural and generally universal, for Thomas, revealed religion is reparative. Thus, he could debate the natural aspects of religion with Jews, Muslims, and, in his case, the Cathars. One of the most intriguing ways to understand the history of the concept of religion is to see it working with regard to a deep problem, the problem of religious violence. Roger A. Johnson’s outstanding study, *Peacemaking and Religious Violence: From Thomas Aquinas to Thomas Jefferson*, gives a careful account of the definition and redefinition of religion in the works of Aquinas, Ramon Lull, Nicholas of Cusa, Herbert of Cherbury, and Thomas Jefferson. The point to notice is that “religion” as a term comes from the classical Latin period and has been historically reworked in the West ever since. The nineteenth century did see it redefined to apply beyond the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim discussions to the texts being translated into European languages from South and East Asia. Of course, the translators, led by Max Muller and James Legge, used European words such as the cognates of “religion” to make translations. Of course, there are European biases that might distort the non-European religious cultures. Of course, this applies to translating any foreign culture into the languages of Europe. Of course, these biases all need to be corrected one by one. European and American scholars have spent over a century and a half working explicitly on the biases of European conceptions with a history. Of course, this book of essays is another attempt to define religion in ways that do not distort other cultures and that do pick up on some common threads that are important for noting differences and similarities.

#### DEFINING RELIGION AS A HARMONY

The customary concept of definition assumed in Western thought reflects Aristotle’s theory of formal causes in which he describes a hierarchy

of genus-species relations, with differentia distinguishing the various species within a genus. In defining things, we usually want first to say what they are, their essence or genus, and then to say how they differ from other things under the same genus. Definitions are more or less rich depending on the depth of layers of genus-species relations. In most contemporary thinking, especially in the sciences, a given level in a genus-species hierarchy can be explicated by an entire theory. Many variations exist on this conception of definition by classification and then distinction from other things in the same class. But they all suppose something like the Aristotelian view that things are substances that bear properties and that the properties can be explicated by classification systems. On this approach to definition, everything that can be defined at all can be treated as a substance bearing its properties. The properties exhibited in a definition inhere in the substance, just as predicates are predicated of a subject.

Let us suppose, however, that things are not unitary substances but rather are harmonies. Some form or pattern unifies the various components of a harmony. Some of the components are essential for unifying the harmony, but others are conditions arising from other things and thus have a reality in part that is external to the harmony in question. Without the latter, which I call “conditional components,” the thing would not be determinate with respect to other things because it would contain no components that connect with the other things. Without the former, which I call “essential components,” the thing would have no being of its own aside from the potential influences of other things that would condition it, but those other things would have nothing to condition and therefore could in fact have no real potential to condition. This analysis of harmony is developed in a number of the chapters to follow.

The characterization of things as harmonies is so abstract as to be a characterization of determinateness itself. To define a thing, anything, from a biological entity to a landscape, to a form, theory, quark, a quantum of energy, or dark matter, to a thought, a perception, or an emotion, or to a society, an economy, the climate, or religion, is to define it as a harmony with a form unifying components that relate the thing to other things through its components, thus intrinsically referring to a field of mutually conditioning things in which the defined thing has an existential location. Any harmony also has the achieved identity or value of unifying its components with its particular form in its place relative to other things in the existential field. Because everything is a harmony, every component of every harmony is a harmony, and so on.

One of the pragmatically significant things about saying that things are harmonies rather than substances is that they cannot be defined by themselves. Rather, the harmonies are defined in part and necessarily by the things in the existential fields in which they lie or in which they interact with other harmonies that condition them and that they condition. The conditional components of a harmony are just as necessary as its essential ones, and those conditional components might not be contained wholly within the harmony they condition. The definition of a harmony includes its environment as well as those essential components that give it a real position in the environment, and the form by which it unifies the conditional and essential environment. Thus, a harmony, strictly speaking, does not “bear” the properties that define it, as a substance might be said to bear properties, but rather harmonizes components in a certain way in an existential field relative to other things. The things in the environment themselves might be changing according to dynamics partly external to the harmony within the environment. By convention we might choose to ignore the external variables in the environment and treat the thing as having definite boundaries because of the properties it bears in abstraction from the environment. So Aristotle could define a duck without making reference to its metabolic systems in the environment, its need for a kind of atmosphere, a temperature range, and gravity; he could assume that those things are a steady environment for duck definition. The languages that emphasize subject-predicate structures reinforce the conventions of thinking of things as being externally related to things in their environment. But even in biology we now realize that things are defined in significant part by internal and sometimes dynamically shifting relations to things in their environment. We are coming to think of things as focal points discriminated within a background, not as things that can be defined or even articulated without a background of conditioning connections. The Chinese language is much friendlier to seeing things as harmonies, defined internally by the other things with respect to which they are determinate.

Now suppose we define religion as *human engagement of ultimacy expressed in cognitive articulations, existential responses to ultimacy that give ultimate definition to the individual, and patterns of life and ritual in the face of ultimacy*. This is the definition that will be developed in the essays in this book. In a preliminary way, we can say what some of its components are. I will mention them here and develop them systematically later, especially in chapter 2. There are five main kinds of components.

First are the components having to do with the worship of whatever is taken to be ultimate. Huge differences exist among ways of understanding and symbolizing ultimacy, and these will be discussed in subsequent essays in this volume. Huge differences also exist among ways of worship, ranging from hot theistic worship of the ultimate as something like an adored or hated person to the cool worship of the ultimate as a ground of being or source of existence.

Second are the components that concern the aesthetic grasp of things as having beauty or the special integrity of a harmony. All religions have art, music, usually dance, architecture, and aesthetically tinged rituals. Lying behind this is the aesthetic grasp of harmonies as the very being of harmonies as determinate: to be a thing is to be a harmony with a particular value. Within religion, there are components that have to do with the appreciation of, response to, and the impulse to enhance the beauties of determinate things. This point will be developed in subsequent essays, but it is the old point expressed in Western theologies as the goodness of all things, in their places.

Third are the components that concern the self, its integration of disparate elements, its overcoming of brokenness with wholeness, with practices of spiritual development, with psychological states. These psychological or spiritual components are often those that function as essential components to integrate the larger aspect of a person's or groups' religious harmony.

Fourth are the components that concern the social and environmental contexts within which religion takes place. All dimensions of human life take place with some social arrangement or others, perhaps of a group defined politically, perhaps with different social roles for people with different kinds of engagements of ultimacy, perhaps with very dense interpersonal relations as within a monastery, or perhaps with thin interpersonal relations as in the case of isolated hermits. The social arrangements within which human engagement of ultimacy can take place vary tremendously, and different arrangements condition those engagements differently.

Fifth are the components that concern the cultures, traditions, and historical trajectories that supply the terms within which religious interpretations take place. Religion as the engagement of ultimacy cannot take place without symbolic signs for imagination and interpretation, whether or not a religious person embraces or attempts to transcend, reject, or revolutionize the semiotic systems at hand.

As a preliminary hypothesis, let me suggest that there are these five kinds of components of religion, to give them handy names: worshipful, aesthetic, psychological, social/environmental, and semiotic. Much more

will be said about each of these. Moreover, excepting the first, each is a dimension of experience that can be understood and studied on its own, irrespective of the roles it plays in a larger harmony of religion. Each is a kind of harmony of its own, with its own components.

Religion is when these and countless other components are harmonized so that ultimacy is engaged. When ultimacy is not engaged, those and other potential components can be present but are not harmonized to constitute religion. This is so even when the components are labeled as religious, for instance, churches and worshipful experiences described as mystical. If religion is defined as a harmony, and its components in a situation do not harmonize, then the thing at hand is not religion. Of course, the customary association of a component with engaging ultimacy can give it a family resemblance label as religious. For instance, ancient Greek temples were components of religion in large part because basic rituals took place within them, and the rituals at least sometimes presumably were engagements of the gods. But the temples in Hellenistic times were also the city butcher shops because animals were ritually slaughtered and their meat sold there. In those times, butchering thus had a religious dimension that it lacks in most places today, kosher butchering being an exception. But major architectural features of Greek temples are commonly used today in American for banks and other financial institutions; perhaps banks fail to be religious through family resemblance.

## ECOLOGIES OF HARMONIES

Return for the moment to the matter of definition. If things are defined as harmonies of components rather than as substances classifiable by their properties, then harmonies are defined and characterized by their relations with one another. One kind of relation is for one harmony to be in another harmony as a component. Another kind of relation is for the form of a harmony to have the character it does by virtue of accommodating another harmony as a component. A third kind of relation is for a harmony to be in a field constituted by other harmonies conditioning one another, embracing some of the harmonies in the field as among its own conditions but embracing the structure of the field itself as constituted by all the harmonies in it. The field itself, of course, can be a harmony.

Given the lingering influence of Aristotle, at least in the West, it is tempting to think of these kinds of relations in a hierarchical way. That is, a harmony is a component in a larger harmony that is itself a component

in a larger harmony, and so on up. Or, a harmony accommodates itself to a component that itself accommodates to its components, and so on down. A harmony has existential location in a field that itself has existential location in a larger field, and so on out. But this model is too rigid because it does not reflect the multifarious ways by which harmonies harmonize components and are themselves involved in other harmonies.

A better metaphor for the relations among harmonies is that they are ecological systems relating to one another. Consider a pond that has a particular ecological balance, where, for the moment, all things are supported by the conditions they need to exist. One of the kinds of component harmonies in the pond ecology is a number of fish of a certain kind. Those fish need the right plants and other nutrients to flourish and multiply to fill their niche in the pond, the niche being the existential field relevant to those fish. The plants in turn are defined as ecologies that have their nutrients as components, including perhaps the by-products of the fishes' metabolism, including their decomposing dead. For the fish to decompose, they need bacteria and other microbes. And the microbes in turn need many, though perhaps not all, of the other component harmonies in the pond ecology. Each of these things—the pond, the fish, the plants, the microbes, and all else within the pond—is an ecological system of its sort.

The harmonies as ecologies were represented in the previous paragraph as if they were static or stable, and we know ponds are not like that. New elements enter the pond, say, a chemical from a new runoff that alters what plants can grow, which alters how the fish can flourish and what microbes are present. Ecologies are constantly evolving and changing as the components required for a certain harmony are altered so that the harmony has to accommodate itself anew or disappear. So, the definition of that pond's harmony must be open to a very complex history of changes over time. The definition on one level can be very vague and denotative, such as "Turner's Pond in Milton, Massachusetts, USA, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries CE." This gives it an Aristotelian genus-species location without many descriptive properties. But to specifically define the pond as the harmony it is, is to accommodate all the things that came to exist in it and how they interacted and altered over time. To define the pond in a non-Aristotelian way that acknowledges that it is a harmony requires indicating its components in some way, showing how the pond as a harmony has to harmonize specific components, and components of components, and so forth.

The difference between a definition and an understanding or explanation seems to be slipping away here. Inquirers need to define their subject matter

and then proceed to investigate how to understand or explain it. Even when the definition of the subject changes as it becomes better understood, there needs to be some intentionality in the inquiry that comes from at least a preliminary definition of the harmony to be understood. So, definition as defining a harmony needs to be open to all the things that necessarily or accidentally function as components relating to the harmony.

For instance, religion is defined in this book as *human engagement of ultimacy expressed in cognitive articulations, existential responses to ultimacy that give ultimate definition to the individual, and patterns of life and ritual in the face of ultimacy*. The harmony that is religion, in this definition, is the actual engagement of ultimacy. But the definition supposes that there are kinds of components that are required for this engagement to take place. The previous section identified five kinds of components that pretty much have to be involved in engaging ultimate realities: worshipful, aesthetic, psychological, social/environmental, and semiotic. Consider the ecological dimensions to these.

Worshipful components of religion need to have focused engagements of what is real, especially what is ultimately real, some kinds of psychological states, some kinds of social contexts in a natural environment, and some semiotic system or network to allow for the discriminations involved in all this. To refer to ultimate realities as components in an engagement may seem to beg some questions, but subsequent essays in this volume will address this point at length. For the moment, we can say that worshipful components of religion need to engage what worshippers believe is ultimate. Perhaps those people are right who think that there is no real reference to anything ultimate because there is nothing ultimate. Solipsists believe there is no real society with the result that the social aspects of religion are illusions. Mechanists believe there is no self (or at least say they believe that and defend it with all their soul), with the result that there are no psychological components of religion. We will come back to this point.

The aesthetic components of religion are the graspings of things as having determinateness, importance, and value insofar as these are involved in engaging ultimacy. Art and music are often involved in rituals of worship. But the arts have natures of their own, definitions that orient attention to them, and these need not be focused on the religious use of the arts, or of aesthetic imagination. All that can be studied on its own. Art history can indicate how art has played roles within religion, and it can indicate how religious institutions and people have shaped and sponsored art. All the components of religion can be components within aesthetic engagement. But the aesthetic elements themselves can be present without

engagement of ultimacy taking place; they sometimes do not contribute to any religious harmony of ultimate engagement.

The psychological or spiritual components too are necessary for religion, although there are many different psychological conditions that can fit the bill. Moreover, religious aesthetic, social/environmental, and semiotic conditions can be components of a person's psychological makeup, as well as experiences of worship.

It is obvious that semiotic traditions go into engaging ultimacy and also that religion as engaging ultimacy conditions the semiotic harmonies of culture and history. And the history and contemporary structure of a semiotic culture can be studied without paying much attention to how it is a component of religious engagement. As prophets have often cried, the semiotic elements of a culture can lose the capacity to facilitate genuine engagement of ultimacy.

The upshot of this section is that definitions as harmonies define things as interdefined. Inquiry into the nature of what is defined involves investigating just how they are interdefined. In the case of religion as human engagements of ultimacy, this means inquiry into how worshipful, aesthetic, psychological, social/environmental, and semiotic components are involved in religion, when religion is actual. Each of those kinds of components, however, has been called "religion" when no actual engagement takes place. Worship rituals, religious art, spiritual practices, religious organizations, and the semiotics of religious traditions have all been called religion itself, even when they fail to come together in a harmony such that ultimacy is engaged. This leads to reductionism and destructive bias, as well as to illusions about what religion really is.

## TUNNELS OF DEFINITION

Different perspectives on religion, such as those listed early in this chapter, are often like tunnels, isolated from one another, working with their own assumptions and procedures, and sometimes crossing one another. Sometimes those tunnels come out at one or another of the important components of religion, oblivious to the others. Because religion is a harmony of so many different kinds of components, each of which is an ecology of components in larger ecologies, it is easy for these perspectives not to be coordinated. But the lack of coordination is as much a function of the different assumptions and procedures of the perspectives as it is a function of

the diverse parts of religion. This section shall examine several different kinds of perspectives, beginning with the scientific.

The social and natural sciences that deal with religion differ in their structural patterns and evolved historically in different ways. Each has its own process of socialization with specialized journals, graduate programs, post-doctoral positions, and a cumulative ethos that defines expertise. Judgment of good work is made within systems of “peer review” in which the peers are others who have been socialized into the scientific specialty. Of course, the scientific disciplines are always changing, developing new ways, and are required to redefine themselves as old theories are found wanting and new roads of inquiry open. But, generally, the sciences are conservative in the sense that they respect the authority of their systems of cumulative peer review and are very careful to accept findings that require rejecting what was previously thought to be known only with extremely persuasive evidence. This is true even with so-called “revolutionary science” that involves the overturning of basic paradigms, because the community of that science needs to understand the reasons for the revolution.

The social and natural sciences are often contrasted with one another, and for many good reasons. But they share the common trait of understanding a subject such as religion by “explaining” it. Explanation in this context means the redescription of the subject matter into some language or theoretical model that is supposed to be understood and accepted on its own. Some people think that human affairs should be explained by being reduced to the models of psychological interaction, as in Plato’s *Republic*. Psychology in turn should be able to be redescribed in the terms of biology, which itself is explained in terms of the functions of chemistry, which then are translated into the terms of physics, which ideally can be expressed purely mathematically. Plato’s hope was that mathematics could be the ultimate model or language in terms of which everything could be explained because he had the intuition that all harmonic relations could be expressed mathematically. His mathematics was not up to the task, and Aristotle’s program for explaining by location in a genus-species classification system was more attractive for two millennia. Most scientists today, I suspect, lean in the Platonic direction.

But most scientists today are not so interested in the chain of reductions down to mathematical physics except for the mathematical physicists. They rather are interested in the topics of their own science, inquiring how to explain them in terms of their own theories, methodologies, instrumentations, and the like, building consensus in the journals and books of their science.

In studying religion, a discipline such as sociology naturally will see religion as something to be explained by sociological paradigms. Durkheim took his paradigms from political and cultural aspects of religious social structures, defining religion in terms of sacred legitimations of authority. Structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and, in different ways, functionalists such as Talcott Parsons analyze social structures in terms of dynamic systems. Marxists define the social aspects of religion in terms of a large historical story. Pressed to be more empirical in the sense of collecting data, many sociologists focus on what can be learned through the methodologies of polling and interviewing. Not much in any of these sociological approaches has the capacity to recognize and explain worship of ultimate realities except in terms of institutions of ritual, or to deal with the psychological aspects except to see how psychological states in religion affect and are affected by institutions, or to deal with the aesthetic dimensions of religion. This situation is not bad so long as the various social sciences know what their assumptions are, know what the alternative assumptions might be, and know what aspects of religion are opened to them by those assumptions and what aspects are closed.

Proper scientific reductionism, in the tradition of Kant, says that it is not studying the thing in itself, religion, but rather only what can be represented of the thing in itself when reconstructed through the theories, methodologies, instrumentations, and socialized communities of judgment of the scientific discipline at hand. But how can any science know what aspect of religion it is studying if it does not have a definition of religion that indicates the other aspects? The very integrity of the tunneled discipline that gives it its standards of objectivity makes any robust definition of religion highly unlikely to be grasped in any but an amateurish way. Remember that the scientific meaning of “objectivity,” deriving however indirectly from Kant, means not religion as a real thing but rather a picture of religion as represented through the constructs of a discipline. For all the good empirical data that can be found through proper scientific reduction, the isolation of the scientific tunnels, controlled by both the tools and assumptions of the particular science and the aspect of religion focused on, contributes to the confusion as to what religion is.

The ecological approach to definition as delineation of harmonies would help resolve some of the confusions by insisting on drawing out the lines of ecological dependence. For instance, when evolutionary biologists and anthropologists “explain” religion by showing how it does or does not contribute to making primitive social groups stronger and thus more adaptive

competitively, it is showing how religion is a component of political order and solidarity. What really is being explained is politics and social authority structures. The same is true for Durkheim's kind of analysis. But when sociologists show how social dynamics determine changes in religious institutions such as church denominations, they show how the overall harmony of religion as engaging ultimacy is affected by the social dynamics.

The humanities also can be discipline tunnels when it comes to understanding religion. This is especially true in philosophy where analytic and Continental philosophers still do not talk with one another with much respect. Postmodernists have their own "discourses" and think systematic philosophers are slightly immoral because they commit the sins of logocentrism. But all have interesting things to say about religion. So do the art historians of all kinds of religious art. Art and literary criticism are helpful regarding understanding religion. Intellectual historians as well as social historians deal with religion. "History of religions" deals with the great religious traditions, and each tradition has its own mode of study, with its own journals and habits of good judgment. Sometimes history of religions finds its home in religious studies departments, sometimes in history departments, and sometimes in area studies. Many of the nuances of these distinctions among the different disciplines' approaches to religion will be discussed in chapters to follow.

Academic disciplines are not the only approaches to religion to characterize it variously. Religion plays many roles in public life in which politics, economics, social dynamics, the arts, and popular entertainment interact. These interactions are represented in journalism and popular media in newsworthy ways. Religious people represent themselves in public life in many different ways. Various continua between popular culture and sophisticated high-brow culture manifest many forms of popular religion and sophisticated theology. Each presents representations of religion and religious life that are usually partial.

The moral to be drawn from all this is not to disparage the many perspectives on religion, each of which seems to have its valid point in some context or other. Rather the moral is to call for a robust definition of religion in terms of which those who are interested can explore how the many perspectives relate. This interest in understanding religion in its wholeness is itself another perspective. Its particular virtue is being able to orient discussions of partiality. The following chapter presents such a definition and sets up a line of inquiry to be pursued throughout the essays in this volume.

## NOTES

1. My remarks here defending the concept of religion parallel in many particulars the arguments of Kevin Schilbrack in his *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), chapter 4.

2. Roger A. Johnson, *Peacemaking and Religious Violence: From Thomas Aquinas to Thomas Jefferson* (Eugene: Pickwick/Wipf & Stock, 2009).

3. I have defended this supposition at length in *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology Volume One* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), chapter 10 and passim.

4. This is the formulaic definition given throughout my three-volume *Philosophical Theology: Ultimates: Philosophical Theology Volume One* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), *Existence: Philosophical Theology Volume Two* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), and *Religion: Philosophical Theology Volume Three* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015). The first occurrence of the definition is in *Ultimates*, 4. The three volumes flesh out and defend the definition in great detail.