The following chapter appeared in an edited collection titled *Religion in Philadelphia* (Temple University Press, 2016). It is one of the introductory essays to the collection, which is aimed at undergraduate students.

What is Religion?

If you sign up for a class in Geology, you probably have a good idea of what you are getting into. You are going to be studying rocks. Yes, some rocks are called minerals, some are dissolved in water, some are surprisingly soft, and some are very old. But they are still rocks. You can hold a rock in your hand. You can touch it. You can feel it. No one doubts that rocks exist. No one argues whether something is rockier than something else. Rocks are real. Religion is very different. You cannot pick up religion or hold it in your hands. Religion is a category that people use to label one cluster of ideas, beliefs, and practices as set apart from other kinds of ideas, beliefs, and practices. The purpose of this essay is to orient students to what it is that scholars mean by the term religion.

When people say *religion* they usually mean something like a “belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement.” This definition from the Oxford English Dictionary is the most common usage of the term, at least in the modern United States. However, if this is what we mean by religion, then it is a very recent and geographically bounded phenomenon. Nobody before the sixteenth century, and very few people outside of Europe through the nineteenth century, thought that believing in superhuman powers, practicing obedience, reverence, and worship, or being a part of a system of living meant belonging to a “religion.” What we now call *religion* was inseparable from day-to-day life. Until around four hundred years ago, most human cultures simply did not divide the world into one set of special experiences, beliefs, and practices that are set apart from more ordinary experiences, beliefs, and practices.¹

The definition of religion that seems familiar to us began to emerge in the mid-sixteenth century after the Protestant Reformation launched a hundred years of warfare between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. The Protestant Reformation began after a German priest named Martin Luther published the Ninety-Five Theses, a document criticizing the Catholic Church. Martin’s criticisms launched several schisms that separated groups including the Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and others from the

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Catholic Church based in Rome. Martin Luther was not the first person to challenge the Roman Church. What was different about the Protestant Reformation was that, for the first time, the Church’s challengers had enough political support to actually take on the church in Rome and communications technology - notably the Gutenberg printing press - allowed for the easy dissemination of religious tracts and Bible translations. But the Protestant Reformation was not an easy split. Reformers and their supporters took up arms against what was left of the Holy Roman Empire. Secular and religious authorities interested in protecting the power of the Roman Catholic Church cracked down on Reformers, often quite violently. Over the next hundred years, Europe split into nation-states, each with its own official state religion. Catholic countries warred with Protestant ones, Protestant countries warred against other Protestant countries, and the deaths mounted. Historians estimate that the number of people who died in the wars that resulted from the Protestant Reformation may range into the tens of millions.²

After the Wars of Religion ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, intellectuals and philosophers in Western Europe and the American colonies began to develop new ideas about the role of religion in social life. This intellectual movement, which we today call the Enlightenment, put forth the idea that the constant religious violence in Europe might end if Protestants and Catholics realized that they had more in common than they thought. Many Enlightenment thinkers were Deists. Deists believed that all religions, at their core, featured a single Creator God and offered similar moral codes. Deists argued that there was once a single Original Religion in the world and that the Original Religion changed over time and developed unique expressions in various corners of the globe. Change over time had given rise to the world’s religious diversity. Deists rejected the Reformers’ and Catholic Church’s argument that their respective religions represented the one true religion. Instead, Deists believed, no single religion could claim to have exclusive truth because all of the world’s religions were imperfect descendants of the Original Religion. Philadelphia’s own Benjamin Franklin played a central role in Deism’s study of this Original Religion. His publication, the Pennsylvania Gazette, pointed out the similarities between the teachings of Confucius and Jesus and drew parallels between Islam and Christianity. Franklin and the Deists were interested in demonstrating how all religions contained a kernel of truth because they hoped that religious people in Europe, would stop killing one another over religious difference.³

The study of religion took on a greater urgency in the nineteenth century because Europeans and Americans were increasingly coming into contact with foreign cultures as they expanded their empires. These highly developed civilizations with richly developed

spiritual traditions posed a theological problem for Christian Europeans who were interested in the comparative study of religion: were all of these people going to hell? Nineteenth century Christians read the Bible as presenting a world in which there are four different types of religious people. God first entered into a covenant with the Jews who could receive salvation through following God’s Law as given to Moses. The New Testament also speaks about the growing community devoted to following the teachings of Jesus, who would later become known as Christians. In addition to Jews and Christians, the Bible speaks about Pagans, a catchall term that biblical authors used to describe the worship of the Greco-Roman pantheon and those who practiced magic, worshiped nature and pursued pleasure. The New Testament, especially Paul’s epistles, warned of heretics - people who claim to speak on behalf of Christ but who are actually false prophets. While Muslims saw the Prophet Mohammad as the final prophet in a chain that included Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus, many Christians interpreted the rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D. as the development of a Christian heresy. This made sense to many Christians until the Age of Colonialism in the nineteenth century. As Europeans and Americans expanded their empires into Asia, India, Africa, and the American West, they came face-to-face with highly developed cultures with ancient religious traditions. This posed a theological problem for Christians interested in other religions: how is it possible that salvation could be limited to only Christians? Were these ancient religious traditions, some of which were far older than Christianity, mistaken? Were all of these non-Christian people damned to hell?\(^4\)

One approach to solving this dilemma of salvation was the development of the theological approach to comparative religions in the mid-nineteenth century. The scholars who developed this approach, who were mostly Protestant theologians teaching at American and British seminaries, wanted to prove that Christianity was the one true religion. They turned the Deists’ theory of Original Religion on its head. Instead of arguing that God had bestowed upon early humankind a perfect revelation that had devolved over time into the religious diversity we see today, nineteenth-century religion scholars applied Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to argue that all of the world’s religions were evolving towards the one true religion, Protestant Christianity. Their reason for pursing this approach to religion is obvious: they were Christians, themselves, and wanted to teach other Christians why the rest of the world’s religions were wrong. In 1852, James Moffat, one of America’s first religious studies scholars said that the purpose of studying religion was to compare the different cultures of the world “by the corresponding degrees of Christian knowledge. From the midnight blackness of Hindoosim, through Mohammedanism [Islam], and Romanism [Catholicism], and formal Protestantism, to the humble, intelligent and faithful follower of the Word of God, you

may distinctly grade the ascending scale of humanity.” Moffat ranked the world religions according to theories of cultural evolution. The most “primitive” religion, in his opinion, was the religion of “Hindooism.” The most advanced religion was the kind of evangelical Protestantism he practiced. Moffat’s approach to religion was built on the theological assumption that Protestant Christianity was the only true religion. Every other religion, if compared to Protestant Christianity, would come up short.5

The next generation of religion scholars sought to replace the theologians’ approach to religion with a more “scientific” approach. How could it be that God had given a revelation that was limited to relatively few people on the planet? How could all of the other deeply religious cultures of the world all be gravely mistaken? This group of scholars developed a new way of categorizing religious diversity: World Religions. A classic example of this approach is the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. The Parliament was meant to offer a corrective to the nativist movements of the time. The dramatic increase in immigration into the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century, most of it from countries outside of Western-Europe, led to a fairly robust nativist backlash amongst some white Protestants. The organizers of the World’s Parliament of Religions hoped that increased education about the other religions of the world could counter this nativist backlash. The parliament featured representatives of over a dozen major religions including Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Zoroastriansim, and Shintoism. The representatives of these ‘World Religions’ were asked to demonstrate their religious practices, explain their basic religious philosophy, and demonstrate the typical characteristics shared by adherents to their religion through common dress, diet, music, and ritual. The logic underlying the World’s Parliament of Religions - the spiritual unity of all religions, that all religions serve essentially the same purpose, and that any religion is better than no religion at all - is the logic of pluralism and is a chief reason why religious studies is considered so important today.6

World Religions was a less exclusionary way for scholars of religion to make sense of the world’s religious diversity, but it also forced the other major world religions to fit a nineteenth-century Protestant paradigm of what ‘religion’ should be. For example, scholars hoping to add the religions of India to the pantheon of World Religions sometimes fabricated religions where they had not been before. Hinduism was a term invented by British colonial officials to describe the cultural practices of a wide variety of ethnic groups living near the Indus River.7 What was once spoken of as “the philosophy

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5 Turner, Religion Enters the Academy, 32.
6 JZ Smith Religion, Religions, Religious
of the Hindus” became, over time, a World Religion called Hinduism which was comparable to other World Religions. Similarly, Western colonialists began calling the “religion of the Buddha” by the word Buddhism. Simply by grouping, naming, and studying diverse religious beliefs and practices within these categories of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, World Religions scholars invented entirely new religious traditions. This is not to say that these cultures did not have beliefs and practices that we could call ‘religious,’ but rather, that the nineteenth century World Religions model consolidated these local beliefs and practices into something more abstract, gave it a catchy name, and suggested that these new additions were analogous to other World Religions.8

The World Religions approach to studying religion opened the door for the academic study of religion. In the 1890s, the first religion departments emerged, first at the University of Chicago and then at the University of Pennsylvania. Early religious studies fully embraced the World Religions model of studying religion with the assumption that religion was a universal phenomenon that manifested in various, culturally specific World Religions. A leading figure in the emergence of the field of religious studies was Max Müller, a scholar who studied the religions of India at Oxford University from 1850 to 1875. Müller set out to make the study of religion into a “scientific” pursuit. He believed that science and religion were incompatible. Since science would eventually replace religion, his theologically oriented colleagues’ efforts to prove Christianity as the one true religion were based on a false assumption. Instead, he thought scholars of religion should look for the characteristics shared by all of the world’s religions. This “scientific” approach to religion was very different from the blatantly theological study of comparative religion that it replaced. Instead of comparing religions, Müller was interested in categorizing them. Müller argued that the variety of religions in the world could be explained by a theory he called the “disease of language.” All cultures throughout history recognized the profundity of the natural world - the majesty of a sunset, the expanse of the night sky, the miracle of birth - and they tried to come up with words to describe this sense of wonder. Müller used the Greek god Apollo to prove his point. “Apollo” once meant ‘sun’. At some point in ancient pre-history, a Greek person must have been attempting to describe how the sun, which he or she called “Apollo,” pointed towards the infinitude of the universe. Over time, “Apollo” became personified. Whereas that theoretical Ancient Greek thinker was once simply referring to a sense of transcendence, later Greek cultures created elaborate backstories and

personalities around Apollo. Through the “disease of language,” they created a god.⁹

In 1902, a Harvard psychologist named William James developed a new theory of religion that argued against Müller’s scientific approach to religion. While Müller’s ‘disease of language’ theory could explain why some concepts developed and how certain religious institutions emerged, it could not, James argued, account for the universal phenomenon of lived religious experience. Müller made a convincing case as to how Apollo went from meaning ‘sun’ to become a personified deity. But what made Greek people want to believe in a god in the first place? What was it about human nature that makes people religious? James developed a definition of religion that would account for this universality of religious experience. To James, religion was “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 divine.” James’s definition of religion had two very important consequences. First, it divided religion into an interiorized “faith” and an exteriorized practice. In other words, faith was something that existed in the mind or the ‘heart’ while religious practice was something that people physically did. This division between faith and practice is crucial to the way many people think of themselves today. When people say they are spiritual but not religious they are echoing James’s division between interior faith and exterior practice. The second consequence of James’s definition was that scholars of religion began treating religion as a universal phenomenon. James assumed that everyone throughout history and in all places experienced the divine. Though various religions may offer different beliefs and practices intended to orient the believer towards the divine, James believed, every human being shares this desire to experience the divine.¹⁰

In 1912, a French sociologist named Émile Durkheim revolutionized the field of religious studies. Instead of studying religion as the product of the individual mind, Durkheim studied religion as a product of culture. Durkheim argued that all societies throughout history were built upon a moral foundation, a set of rules that everyone had to follow in order for the society to survive and flourish. These rules of society, he argued, are what we study when we study religion. As evidence, Durkheim used the new anthropologic research on Aboriginal tribes of Australia. Durkheim noticed that these tribes used totems - usually a certain species of animal that was thought to be unusually powerful and special - to represent the clan. Each member of the tribe felt an obligation

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towards the totem and revered its power. Durkheim used this observation to develop a theory called the Totemic Principle. He argued that the totem serves a function for the tribe. It reminds each member of the tribe of his or her obligations to the greater good. Even though individuals may die, the totem, as the clan, lives on forever. Durkheim believed that this was the essence of religion in every culture - religious symbols, religious rituals, and religious beliefs were all ways of expressing social realities. He believed that a religion was “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, I.e., things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” To Durkheim, the reason religion exists is to reinforce the social element of life; it serves a social function. 11

Durkheim’s theory was a radical departure from the theories of James and Müller. Both James and Müller thought religion was the product of individual minds. Religion was primarily a collection of beliefs about the supernatural world. James and Müller wanted to show how something simple like a belief in God or in something transcendent, became complex religious systems. Durkheim’s logic ran the opposite direction. He wanted to show how something that seemed complex (religious systems) were in fact simple social constructions. Though religions appeared to be complex webs of ritual and belief, they were simply a culture’s way of getting everyone to play by the rules. There was no need, Durkheim argued, to study religion as the product of revelation and invention. When we study religion, we study culture and when we study culture, we study religion. Durkheim made the study of religion historical.

Durkheim’s social functionalist definition of religion reigned supreme until 1957 when a religion scholar from the University of Chicago named Mircea Eliade published a book titled The Sacred and the Profane. It was Durkheim who first suggested that the essence of religion is dividing the world into those things that are sacred (set apart and special) and those things that are profane (normal, everyday activities with no transcendent meaning). Eliade took this concept of the sacred and the profane and developed a theory of religion that argued against Durkheim’s functionalism. To Eliade, the “sacred” was a much more central concept to cultures than Durkheim realized. The sacred was not merely an artificial category that societies created to enforce the rules. Rather, the sacred, to Eliade, was a glimpse into an alternative reality, one with deeper meaning. According to Eliade, the role of religion, in all times and in all cultures, is to promote and enhance connections with the sacred. The sacred is central to day-to-day life in cultures all over the world and throughout every time period. Eliade was struck by what he interpreted as similarities in religious symbols shared by disparate cultures. He found cultures all over the world that had “Son” gods who suffered for mankind’s sake,

died, and then were resurrected. He found recurring sun and moon deities and supreme sky gods. He also argued that every culture has a sense of a Fall, a primordial event that triggered a separation of our present reality from the infinite. To Eliade, religion was ripe for cross-cultural comparison as long as scholars of religion realized that behind seemingly different religious expressions we can find common notions of the sacred. Eliade’s definition of religion brought religious studies full circle. Since Müller, scholars of religion tried to approach religion in a scientific way. This scientific approach assumed that the supernatural was not a real phenomenon and that cultures made up gods, spirits, and religions in order to make sense of a confusing world. Eliade, on the other hand, thought that scholars of religion should take the reality of the sacred as a starting point. It doesn’t matter to us, as scholars of religion, whether or not the supernatural is a real thing. What matters is that the people we study believe in the supernatural and use it to make sense out of their worlds.  

Since the 1970s, the field of religion has grown to encompass a wide variety of definitions of “religion.” Many scholars have embraced Geertz’s emphasis on studying the relationships people form with religious symbols as a methodology called “lived religion.” Contemporary religion scholar Robert Orsi argues that religion is a “network of relationships between heaven and earth” that involve saints, ancestors, demons, gods, and ghosts. In this “lived religion” approach, beliefs, creeds, and institutions are less important than the “things, practices, or presences” that make religion real to the devout.  

Recently, some religion scholars have combined religious studies with neurological and cognition research and in an attempt to identify the biological sources of religious experience. Ann Taves, a pioneer in what has become known as cognitive religion, has argued the human brain is hardwired to consciously and subconsciously interpret some experiences as “special” and that today we call these experiences religious, mystical, or spiritual. Within the last decade, scholars have dramatically expanded the types of beliefs and practices that can be called “religion.” For example, a recent, well-received book by religion scholar Kathryn Lofton considers what is gained and lost if we study Oprah as a religion.  

After all this, we return to our original question: what is religion? That is a question that might be unanswerable. But if it is unanswerable, it is because there are simply too many beliefs, practices, emotions, sights, smells, sounds, and journeys that we can call “religious.” There may be as many varied religious experiences as there are

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religion. Religion is a starting point for thinking deeply about many of the most pressing issues in our society today. Through studying religion, you can explore the ways in which space becomes sacred, probe the ultimate meaning human cultures ascribe to death and dying, explore the philosophies and ancient wisdom of faraway places, and develop answers to the social problems of racism and poverty. The study of religion is an exercise in understanding what assumptions, values, and backgrounds we bring to decisions to categorize something as “religious.” This is the great value in studying religion and in studying the humanities in general. Whatever career you choose, you will be better at that career if you know how to think deeply, to ask the right questions, and to take no assumption for granted. When we study religion, however we define “religion,” we are practicing empathy, widening our scope of knowledge, and—most importantly—learning how to think.

**Further Reading:**


