Definition of religion. Annotated bibliography. Studies in English on anthropology and sociology of religion

The Problem of defining Religion

First Part: General studies in English:

A - Cas

Cav - Fuj

Gar -Kim

Kin - Owe

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Smi - Z

Second Part: Studies in English on various religions:

Judaism, Christianity, Roman, Greek

Buddhism, Chinese, Hinduism

Islam, Shinto, Asian, African, Australian, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism

Third Part: Studies in English on various disciplines:

History of religions, Comparative religions

Anthropology and sociology of religion (Current page)

Psychology, philosophy, phenomenology, law, politics

Bibliography

Anthropology of religion

1. Asad, Talal. 1983. "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz." *Man* no. 18:237–259.

Abstract: "This article examines Geertz's well-known definition of religion, with its emphasis on meanings, and argues that it omits the crucial dimension of power, that it ignores the varylng social conditions for the production of knowledge, and that its initial plausibility derives from the fact that it resembles the privatised forms of religion so characteristic of modern (Christian) society, in which power and knowledge are no longer significantly generated by religious institutions. A critlcal evaluation of Geertz's text is accompanied by brief explorations of some of the ways in which power and knowledge were connected in medieval Christianity. The article ends with a plea for lnvestigatlng religion with reference to the historical conditions necessary for the existence of particular practices and discourses."

2. ———. 1993. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category." In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 27–54. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
"In what follows I want to examine the ways in which the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power. I shall do this by exploring a universalist definition of religion offered by an eminent anthropologist: Clifford Geertz's "Religion as a Cultural System." (2) I stress that this is not primarily a critical review of Geertz's ideas on religion— if that had been my aim I would have addressed myself to the entire corpus of his writings on religion in Indonesia and Morocco. My intention in this chapter is to try to identify some of the historical shifts that have produced our concept of religion as the concept of a transhistorical essence— and Geertz's article is merely my starting point.
It is part of my basic argument that socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of what was regarded as religion in the medieval Christian epoch were quite different from those so considered in modern society. I want to get at this well-known fact while trying to avoid a simple nominalism. What we call religious power was differently distributed and had a different thrust. There were different ways in which it created and worked through legal institutions, different selves that it shaped and responded to, and different categories of knowledge which it authorized and made available. Nevertheless, what the anthropologist is confronted with, as a consequence, is not merely an arbitrary collection of elements and processes that we happen to call " religion." For the entire phenomenon is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained. My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes." (p. 29)

3. ———. 2001. "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion"." *History of Religions* no. 40:205–222.
"Wilfred Cantwell Smith was a remarkable scholar of comparative religion who died in Toronto on February 7, 2000, at the age of eighty-three.
(...)
In 1962 he published a book entitled *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which is perhaps his most famous work, one that is most widely cited by historians of comparative religion. It is this book that I want to discuss in what follows, because it represents some of the strengths and weaknesses of religious studies as seen from one perspective.
The Meaning and End of Religion contains many insights and was the first to argue against essentialist definitions of religion. I find myself in sympathy with its antiessentialist instinct. And yet in the end I find that it too clings to an essentialism-one that pushes away important questions for comparative research. I propose in this article to engage with Smith's text, drawing out of that dialogue what I think is important for the comparative study of religion. In particular, I make two general points, both of which are difficult to appreciate from Smith's approach.

First, I emphasize that in order to pay serious attention to religious experience in a comparative context, we must examine carefully the part played by religious practices in the formation of such experiences. And second, I plead for the integration of "secularism" into the analysis of religion-that is, for examining secularism not merely as a political ideologythat structures the modern liberal state but as an untidy historical complex that includes behavior, knowledge, and sensibility in the flow of everyday life. Both my points share this assumption: that in identifying what we call "religion"-whether musical, pictorial, or textual-the materialities of religion are integral to its constitution. Although I do not explore the varieties of media here, I stress again and again that understanding them is necessary to the task of analyzing and comparing religious experience, behavior and commitment.
I want to emphasize at the start that despite my arguments with it, I regard Smith's book to be indispensable reading for any student of comparative religion. Criticism, in my view, is most useful when it aims at reformulating the questions underlying a work, not at demolishing it.
In such an engagement it seems to me more fruitful to try to shift critical attention toward what one thinks important for research and inquiry.
In what follows, I try to do this with Smith's masterpiece *The Meaning and End of Religion*." (pp. 205-206)

4. ———. 2012. "Thinking about religion, belief, and politics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Orsi, Robert A., 35–57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
"But I want to begin with other questions: What is “religion”? How has it come to be defined in the ways it has? What are some of the political consequences of making belief central to the definition? I will address some of these questions by discussing aspects of Charles Taylor ’s work *A Secular Age*, whose central argument is that secularization cannot be narrated as a simple subtraction story (that is, as the gradual abandonment of superstition and intolerance), but must take the form of an account of historical remaking in which the choice of belief and unbelief come to have an equal and equally protected status in the liberal-democratic state. This is an important thesis, but I want to think beyond it. I will do so by looking at the ambiguous notion of belief as both Taylor and some anthropologists have dealt with it. I will urge the importance of studying the senses in order to identify ways they can build sensibilities and attitudes that are distinct from beliefs. Then I will turn to a recent ethnographic work that is concerned with the place of listening in the contemporary political scene in Cairo, Charles Hirschkind ’s *The Ethical Soundscape*. I will conclude with some questions about the connections between sensibilities and politics." (pp. 36-37)

5. Bielo, James S. 2015. *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*. New York: Routledge.
"Chapter 1 addresses our organizing category, “religion”: why anthropologists define this term differently, critiques of the category, and the relationship of “religion” with a companion category, “the secular”." (*Preface*, p. XIII)
(...)
"Chapter summary
In this chapter, we have critically examined “religion” as the organizing category for the anthropology of religion. Our first task was definition. Through comparing nine definitions, we saw that the act of defining can establish a normative posture toward religion, elevate particular aspects of religion over others, and mirror a scholar’s theoretical commitments.
We then considered some anthropological critiques of “religion.”
Some scholars are suspicious of the entire category, seeing it as bogged down by ethnocentric baggage. We also explored critiques of “belief,” a foundational concept in the anthropological study of religion that has generated its own suspicions. This section closed with a provocation: that religion can also thrive outside of defined religious traditions. My hope in presenting these critical voices is to illustrate how

the study of religion is enhanced when we refuse to take ideas for granted or accept them at face value.
Our third section placed “religion” in dialogue with the category of the secular. Religion–secular entanglements are incredibly important for understanding the dynamics of religion in modern life. We compared the secularisms of China, India, France, and Turkey, demonstrating how state secular projects can differ widely from one another. To gain a fuller sense for how particular secular conditions impact religious life, we zoomed in ethnographically on three post-Soviet contexts. We concluded this section by sketching a useful distinction between public religion and religious publicity.
Ultimately, this chapter helps us think about the wide-ranging contents and boundaries of religious life. I placed a bet at the outset, that by the end you would appreciate why a definitive, succinct answer for what religion is would be unhelpful and, even, misleading.
Did I bet wisely? My hope is that you are now better equipped to think critically about what religion is, what agenda(s) you might bring to studying religion, and why the anthropology of religion is pivotal to our comparative and holistic understanding of the human condition." (pp. 27-28)

6. Cohn, Werner. 1967. ""Religion" in non-Western cultures?" *American Anthropologist* no. 69:73–76.
"I wish to suggest in this brief communication that most of the best-known anthropological writings on “religion” in non-Western cultures contain as their central assumption a proposition that is based on an error in reasoning. The proposition is that religion can usefully be thought of as existing universally, and the error in reasoning consists of an unacknowledged and apparently unrecognized switch of meaning for the term “religion” in the middle of the argument.
My thesis may be summarized as follows: when the term “religion” appears in the ethnographies of non-Western peoples, there is always an implicit comparison with the West. But ethnographers use one set of criteria for determining religion outside the West and another set of criteria for determining religion in the West. If the ethnographer were to use the same criteria for the West that he uses for the non-West, the effect would he a serious undermining of current notions regarding the universality of religion." (p. 73)

7. Donovan, James M. 2003. "Defining Religion." In *Selected Readings in the Anthropology of Religion: Theoretical and Methodological Essays*, edited by Glazier, Stephen D. and Flowerday, Charles A., 61–98. Westport: Praeger.
"Conclusions
The charge of this essay was to review definitional trends of religion.
Four major types were discussed: content, behavior, mental, and functional.
While each type has considerations that suggest its relevance, all are incomplete when examined in isolation. Consequently, two approaches combining these types were briefly discussed: conjunctive and generative.
Judging the former inferior to the latter, it was suggested that only the functional definitions are capable of being truly generative. The most inclusive definition of religion, therefore, will be one that is generative functional. Clues as to what such a definition might look like are foundfirst in the lapse of both Stark and Durkheim, when trying to expound on an entirely different criterion, into speaking about beliefs. A strong definitional contender will also be one that emphasizes religion as a phenomenon that works primarily in response to the needs of the individual, not of society, however much the latter may appropriate and manipulate religious forms to meet its own, different needs (making it misleading to speak of “a culture’s religion,” when a culture can only have a modal religious form). A second consideration favoring this locus is that anthropologists observe individuals, and can only extrapolate from these individuals conclusions about “society” and “culture.” Making the individual the focus of religion may facilitate the operationalization required for any useful definition.

It is possible to propose a definition of just this type: the definition of religion is any belief system that serves the psychological function of alleviating death anxiety. Defense of this statement is extensively laid out elsewhere (Donovan 1994). As implied earlier, this definition should be assumed to apply best to the prototypical instances of the class. Further work will be required to account for deviations from this prototype." (pp. 91-92)

8. Dubuisson, Daniel. 2007. "Exporting the Local: Recent Perspectives on 'Religion' as a Cultural Category." *Religion Compass* no. 1/6:787–800.
"Introduction
Over the last decade or so, and particularly in the English-speaking world, the field of study and research conventionally called the 'history of religions' has witnessed the appearance of new questions and new working hypotheses.
There are a certain number of significant convergences and common themes among them; and two or more of their authors sometimes think along parallel lines. We must also note that these new perspectives have the potential to make unrecognizable the traditional landscape of the history of religions as it was constructed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will examine the most important among them in a moment, but only after reminding ourselves of a few facts that will permit us to understand better how these new approaches break radically with the past." (p. 787)
(...)
"Conclusion
We shall only know, of course, 10 or 20 years down the road whether or not these pioneering works will have modified the meaning and general orientation of studies carried out under the aegis of the history of religions. What is already certain is that they offer the first serious and fruitful alternative capable of freeing the history of religions from its heavy theological heritage, from its dependence on the postulates of phenomenology, and from its deep ethnocentric tendencies. Perhaps one day these works will be recognized as having prepared the way for the most important and most radical aggiornamento achieved by religious studies since its creation." (p. 798)

9. Eller, Jack David. 2022. *Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate*. New York: Routledge.
Chapter 1: *Studying religion anthropologically. Definitions and theories*, pp. 1-25.
"Conclusion
Whatever subject it approaches, anthropology brings its unique perspective of cross-cultural or comparative study, holism, and cultural relativism. This entails treating each religion in its own terms and relating it to its social and historical context. In the case of religion, this is not always easy to achieve.
Religion has been notoriously difficult to define, and every proposed definition has some value, emphasizing some important dimension of religion. No single definition is entirely adequate, and no definition is ever "true," only more or less inclusive and more or less productive. How we define religion determines what we accept *as religion*, and however we define religion, the definition presents new definitional problems. What is "spirit"? What is "belief"? Anthropologists have found that "religion" itself is a culture-specific concept in the first place, since not all cultures even have a word or concept for religion.
Like definitions, theories are attempts to formulate what is important and unique about religion, and different disciplines naturally see religion in different ways. Religion undoubtedly is emotion and idea and ritual and institution. Like definitions, theories set boundaries and suggest lines of research. Recently, some of the most productive suggestions for research have come from modular and evolutionary theories of religion, offering a convergence of many disciplines but dominated by a psychological/cognitive perspective." (pp. 24-25)

10. Geertz, Clifford. 1966. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Banton, Michael, 1–46. London:

Tavistock Publications.
Reprinted as Chapter 4 in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: Basic Books 1973, pp. 87-125.
"The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes. My dissatisfaction with so much of contemporary social anthropological work in religion is not that it concerns itself with the second stage, but that it neglects the first, and in so doing takes for granted what most needs to be elucidated. To discuss the role of ancestor worship in regulating political succession, of sacrificial feasts in defining kinship obligations, of spirit worship in scheduling agricultural practices, of divination in reinforcing social control, or of initiation rites in propelling personality maturation, are in no sense unimportant endeavors, and I am not recommending they be abandoned for the kind of jejune cabalism into which symbolic analysis of exotic faiths can so easily fall. But to attempt them with but the most general, common-sense view of what ancestor worship, animal sacrifice, spirit worship, divination, or initiation rites are as religious patterns seems to me not particularly promising. Only when we have a theoretical analysis of symbolic action comparable in sophistication to that we now have for social and psychological action, will we be able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion (or art, or science, or ideology) plays a determinant role." (p. 125)

11. ———. 1968. "Religion: Anthropological study." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences: Volume 13*, edited by Sills, David L., 398–406. New York: Macmillan.
"At least three major intellectual developments have exercised a critical influence on the anthropological study of religion: (1) the emergence, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, of history as the sovereign science of man; (2) the positivist reaction against this sovereignty in the first decades of the twentieth century and the radical split of the social sciences into resolutely psychological approaches, on the one hand, and resolutely sociological ones, on the other; and (3) the growth, in the interwar period, of a concern with the role of ideational factors in the regulation of social life.
With the first of these came an emphasis on the nature of primitive reasoning and the stages of its evolution into civilized thought. With the second came an investigation of the emotional basis of religious ritual and belief and the separate examination of the role of ritual and belief in social integration.
The concern with value systems and other features of the ideational realm led to an exploration of the philosophical dimensions of religious ideas, particularly the symbolic vehicles in terms of which those ideas are expressed."

12. Goodenough, Ward H. 1974. "Toward an Anthropologically Useful Definition of Religion." In *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, edited by Eister, Allan W., 165–184. New York: John Wiley.
"It may seem that the approach to religion taken here opens the door too wide, so that almost everything becomes religion. If that is so, does the concept of religion lose its value for social and behavioral science by becoming too general? That religious concerns pervade much of human activity seems to me no more troublesome in this regard than the well accepted idea that economic concerns do so also. Given our habits of mind, anthropologists may feel more comfortable to confine the term religion to publicly approved customary practices and professions of belief that have to do with ego-concerns of the kind I have discussed. In doing so, however, we must recognize that we are dealing with a phenomenon resembling an iceberg. Our understanding of the phenomenon requires that we consider its totality, not just the small portion that shows above water or that is publicly approved and institutionalized.
It is not startlingly new to define religion in terms of human problems of being, in a psychological (i.e., spiritual) as distinct from a material sense. The problem is that

anthropologists have not followed out the logical implications of such definition. But by doing just this, it seems to me, we can put the comparative study of religion on a firmer foundation than will ever be possible as long as we continue to take the content of professed belief about supernatural beings (or about anything else) as our defining criterion." (pp. 182-183)

13. Hewitt, J. N. B. 1902. "Orenda and a Definition of Religion." *American Anthropologist* no. 4:33–46.
"*Orenda*. The Iroquois name of the fictive force, principle, or magic power which was assumed by the inchoate reasoning of primitive man to be inherent in every body and being of nature and in every personified attribute, property, or activity, belonging to each of these and conceived to be the active cause or force, or dynamic energy, involved in every operation or phenomenon of nature, in any manner affecting or controlling the welfare of man. This hypothetic principle was conceived to be immaterial, occult, impersonal, mysterious in mode of action, hmited in function and efficiency, and not at all omnipotent, local and not omnipresent, and ever embodied or immanent in some object, although it was believed that it could be transferred, attracted, acquired, increased, suppressed, or enthralled by the orenda of occult ritualistic formulas endowed with more potency." (Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians of Noth of Mexico*, Washington: Government Printing Office 1910, p. 147)
"Hence religion, albeit a most highly developed expression of human activity, may be defined as any system of words, acts, or devices, or combinations of these, employed to obtain welfare or to avert ill-fare through the use, exercise, or favor of the *orenda* of another body or bodies. But in view of the fact that the primal law of growth is organization through the development and conservation of the congruous, it follows from this definition that any word, any act, or any device, or any combination of these, designed to induce some other body or bodies to use or exercise *orenda* for the purposes indicated above, must justly and essentially be termed religious." (p. 42)

14. Horton, Robin. 1960. "A Definition of Religion, and its Uses." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* no. 90:201–226.
"In recent British anthropology three principal types of working definition have been used in approaching the comparative study of religion. The first treats the term 'Religion' as lending itself with difficulty to further definition and as covering an area of human activity which lacks sharply delineated boundaries; where such a point of view prevails, the reader is simply asked to accept as 'religious' any phenomena which the author happens to select for treatment under this heading. The second type treats 'Religion' as referring to a class of metaphorical statoments and actions obliquely denoting social relationships and claims to social status. The third type treats the term as referring to commerce with a specific class of objects, i.e. 'Religion is the belief in spirits' or 'Religion is the belief in the supernatural'. As they stand, I believe all of these approaches are unsatisfactory, and in this paper I shall follow up their criticism with the proposal of an alternative definition. Definitions being mere tools towards the discovery of empirical regularities, I shall of course try to show that the alternative proposed is of value in terms of the hypotheses and questions it suggests about the determinants of religious forms." (p. 201)
(...)
"In short, Religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness' sake, we should perhaps add the rider that this extension must be one in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position *vis-à-vis* their non-human alters-a qualification necessary to exclude pets from the pantheon of gods." (p. 211)

15. Klass, Morton. 1995. *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion*. Boulder: Westview Press.
Chapter 3: *The Definitional Daisy Chain*, pp. 17-24.

"In this chapter, therefore, I propose to bring definition front and center. Happily, Spiro has blazed an easy trail for us to follow, and through his efforts we will gain insight into the reasons why some scholars genuflect to Durkheim's definition and then proceed to ignore it. Spiro not only explores some aspects of the nature and consequences of definition itself; he makes it clear why he finds it necessary to reject Durkheim's classic definition of religion. But, as we shall see, Durkheim anticipated Spiro's arguments and rejected them even earlier. After a review of the debate between Spiro and Durkheim, we turn to Geertz in an effort to determine whether he has, with his very different approach, finally solved the problem of definition for us.

In our exploration of the problem of defining our subject matter, we shall inevitably opens that perhaps the most commonly held definition of religion is that it deals with the supernatural. I therefore touch on this topic in this chapter, but I argue that it is sufficiently momentous an issue to deserve separate consideration in a chapter of its own. After that, however, I promise to conclude thesubject with what I hope will serve as an operationally meaningful delineation of religion as a panhuman, cross-culturally valid, nonethnocentric cultural rubric.

Though I am arguing that there are currently really only two significant and widely held positions on the definition of religion as a panhuman phenomenon—as a rubric or institution of culture—there are, of course, significant differences, often of some substance, among those who hold to a particular definition." (p. 18)

References

Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1965. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Spiro, Melford E. 1971. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. M. Banton, ed. ASA Monograph no. 3. London: Tavistock Publications, 85-126.

16. Lambek, Michael. 2013. "What Is "Religion" for Anthropology? And What Has Anthropology Brought to "Religion"?" In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Boddy, Janice and Lambek, Michael, 1–32. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

"For anthropology, religion implicitly informs and underpins the worlds in which people live, enabling the habitus (everyday practice) to run its course, to go "without saying." It also becomes the explicit subject and object of people's passion in marked rituals and other forms of enactment, creation, contemplation, and devotion. It is "culture" in its purest or most rarified form, both deep and relatively invisible and also frequently refracted in constructions that explicitly distinguish it from the everyday or the commonsensical. It is for the sake of what we now call religion that ancient Egyptian and Mayan pyramids, Gothic cathedrals, Hindu temples, and Buddhist monasteries were constructed, and elaborate masquerades and beautiful music composed and performed. In the name of religion people receive, recite, and cherish scripture, perform daily ablutions, prayers and acts of penance, make sacrifices, donate alms, scarify their children, renounce sex, limit food or other creature comforts, seek visions, and set forth on arduous pilgrimages. Many of the great dramas of human life have been generated or carried out through what we call religion – and it remains an open question whether or to what degree the professional "callings" of modern life, in science, the arts, business, sport, or politics, might be seen in overlapping terms. Religion is also inherently complex; for participants it can be at once ordinary and extraordinary, practical and beautiful, necessary and ideal, comforting and frightening, absolutely clear and deeply mysterious, the site of the deepest certainties and of the most disturbing doubts." (p. 3)

17. Laughlin, Jack C., and Zathureczky, Kornel. 2015. "An Anatomy of the Canonization of Asadian Genealogy: A Case Study." *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* no. 15:233–252.

Abstract: "The critique of dominant discourses in the study of religion now stands at the forefront of discussions about theory and method. But we have come to a point

where this challenge to orthodoxy ‘‘has assumed an increasingly rigid and canonical shape.’’ Ironically, this has resulted in the ossification of the object of critique, ‘‘the modern conception of religion.’’ The consequence has been multiple reiterations of the claim that there was no such thing as religion before moderns invented it, and the surveillance of scholarship of the ancient world to purge it of the use of religion as a descriptive category. Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* is an example of this process and it is used in this article as a case study that examines the anatomy of the rise of a new normativity. The article challenges both Nongbri’s essentialized dichotomy between ancient and modern and his near canonization of recent theory (especially that of Asad) in the study of religion. Instead, it is proposed that fostering critical awareness within the discipline is achieved by moving beyond today’s deconstructivist trends."

18. Lee, Dorothy. 2010. "Religious Perspectives in Anthropology." In *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Moro, Pamela A. and Myers, James E., 20–27. New York.
Eighth edition; first edition 1985.
"At first glance, the study of the religion of non-Western cultures may appear somewhat esoteric, albeit interesting. In reality, however, religion is very much a part of everyday, practical activities in these cultures, and knowledge of a society's religion is essential for the successful introduction of social changes. In the following article, Dorothy Lee dramatically shows how religion is part and parcel of preliterate people's worldview, or *Weltanschauung*: the corpus of beliefs about the life and environment in which members of a society find themselves. Among preliterate societies, economic, political, and artistic behavior is permeated by religion. Lee points out that anthropologists make every attempt to understand the insiders' "emic" view of their universe, which they share with other members of their group, and demonstrates that an outsider's "etic" view is too limited a base of cultural knowledge on which to introduce innovations that do not violate the religious tenets of the society and meet with acceptance." (p. 21)

19. Martin, Craig. 2014. "Genealogies of Religion, Twenty Years On: An Interview with Talal Asad." *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* no. 43:12–17.
"Last fall, realizing that 2013 marked the twentieth anniversary of Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, I interviewed Talal Asad—Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at The City University of New York—on the book and its reception and influence on the field. *Genealogies of Religion* influenced me early in my graduate studies—particularly the first chapter on “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in which Asad argues that the concept of “religion” is, in many contemporary contexts, fundamentally shaped by Protestant assumptions. This was one of the first books I was exposed to that argued there is normative work accomplished by the very term “religion,” and all of my writings since have taken this idea as a central starting point. I want to thank Asad for taking the time to answer the questions I posed to him." (p. 12)

20. Mitchell, Jon P. 2017. "Defining Religion: Geertz and Asad." In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, edited by King, Richard, 327–334. New York: Columbia University Press.
"As a debate rooted in anthropology, the exchange between Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad revolves around universals and particulars. While Clifford Geertz attempts a universal definition of religion that also accounts for the differences between particular religious traditions, Asad particularizes not only the definition of religion, but more fundamentally the very possibility of a universal definition of religion, suggesting that Geertz’s universalism is itself particular—rooted in particular modern, Christian-influenced understandings of what religion *is* and what it *does*. While Geertz sees religion as a cultural or symbolic system with distinct properties and functions, Asad sees particular religions as discursive traditions that

authorize particular forms of religious practice and knowledge, including the very definition of what qualifies as “religion” in the first place." (p. 327)

21. Saler, Benson. 1994. "Cultural Anthropology and the Definition of Religion." In *The Notion of “Religion” in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVI Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (I.A.H.R.), Rome, 3rd–8th September, 1990*, edited by Bianchi, Ugo, 831–836. Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider.
"Both within and without anthropology occasional voices have been raised in criticism of "religion" as an object of study or analytical category(1). Despite, however, reservations expressed about the suitability of the notion of religion as research instrument, and notwithstanding some interesting suggestions about what might be substituted for it in scholarly pursuits, most anthropologists, and most persons in sister disciplines, continue to use the term religion fairly freely. And although numbers of persons write or talk about religion without defining it, on the assumption that their audiences will understand them, many scholars continue to offer or otherwise support explicit definitions.
Definitions of religion, it is worth saying, can have value even when we do not accept them. For explicit definitions may do more than indicate what their framers prefer to mean by terms. They are likely to suggest some of the things that their definers deem noteworthy or important. Religion is a conventional, and in that regard convenient, wy of talking about matters that interest us. Perhaps som day scholars will employ a different vocabulary and commit themselves to a different discourse. For the time-being, however, religion remains with us as term and as category, a happenstance that justifies the theme of this Congress, *The notion of 'religion' in comparative research.*
My paper reviews certain conceptual and definitional strategies employed by anthropologists and selected others in their efforts to clarify and improve understandings that they associate with the term religion." (p. 831)
(1) e.g., W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Macmillan 1963 (1962), 12; R. Needham, *Circumstantial Deliveries*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1981, 73.

22. Segal, Robert A. 2003. "Clifford Geertz’s Interpretive Approach to Religion." In *Selected Readings in the Anthropology of Religion: Theoretical and Methodological Essays*, edited by Glazier, Stephen D. and Flowerday, Charles A., 17–34. Westport: Praeger.
"Of all contemporary anthropologists, Clifford Geertz is the most esteemed exponent of an interpretive rather than explanatory approach to religion and to culture in general. Geertz is acclaimed as much for his advocacy of interpretation as for the particular interpretations he offers. But what an “interpretive” approach means is much more elusive than the frequency of its invocation suggests. For there are multiple ways of defining both interpretation and explanation, and it is far from clear that by all or even any of them Geertz practices interpretation rather than explanation." (p. 17)
(...)
"The difference for Geertz between explanation and interpretation is not, then, in the function religion serves but in the characterization of that function. In asserting that humans have an innate drive to make sense of life, earlier Geertz is asserting that that drive causes them to engage in religious and other sense-making activities. In continuing to assert that humans have an innate drive to make sense of life, later Geertz is asserting that religious and other sense-making activities express that drive." (p. 26)

23. Seitschek, Hans Otto. 2006. "Religion." In *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Brix, H. James, 1998–2003. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
"Religion is more than the mere name of a belief; it expresses that man is concerned about something that is beyond him. Summing up, one could characterize religion as follows: First, there is no generic term for all religions of mankind. Second, there

is no term that can include all aspects of what is nowadays meant by “religion”; even all these terms together cannot cover everything. Third, in contrast to the modern meaning of religion, earlier terms put the emphasis on the external practice of religion, on the observance of ritual instructions and regulations, and obedience to religious law. These terms, however, are neither unambiguously classified nor do they appear in an outstanding function. It is this final characterization that portrays the broad conceptual frame of the modern concept of religion." (p. 2003)

24. Spiro, Melford E. 1966. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Banton, Michael, 85–126. London: Tavistock Publications.
"Before examining various approaches to the explanation of rehgion, we must first agree about what it is that we hope to be able to explain. In short, we must agree on what we mean by ‘religion’. Anthropology, hke other immature sciences - and especially those whose basic vocabulary is derived frorh natural languages - continues to be plagued by problems of definition.
Key terms in our lexicon - ‘culture’, ‘social system’, ‘needs’, ‘marriage’, ‘function’, and the like - continue to evoke wide differences in meaning and to instigate heated controversy among scholars. Frequently the differences and controversies stem from differences in the types of definition employed." (p. 85)
(...)
"In sum, any comparative study of religion requires, as an operation antecedent to inquiry, an ostensive or substantive definition that stipulates unambiguously those phenomenal variables which are designated by the term. This ostensive definition will, at the same time, be a nominal definition in that some of its designata will, to other scholars, appear to be arbitrary. This, then, does not remove ‘religion’ from the arena of definitional controversy; but it does remove it from the context of fruitless controversy over what religion ‘really is’ to the context of the formulation of empirically testable hypotheses which, in anthropology, means hypotheses susceptible to cross-cultural testing." (p. 91)
(...)
"On the assumption that religion is a cultural institution, and on the further assumption that all institutions - though not all of their features - are instrumental means for the satisfaction of needs, I shall define ‘religion’ as ‘an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings’. I should llke to examine these variables separately." (p. 96)

25. Stein, Rebecca L., Stein, Philip L. , Kracht, Benjamin R., and Snipes, Marjorie M. 2025. *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. New York: Routledge. Fifth edition; first edition 2008.
"The anthropological perspective
The subject of this book is religion from an anthropological perspective. What does this mean? The term anthropology refers to the study of humanity. However, anthropology shares this subject matter with many other disciplines—sociology, psychology, history, and political science, to name a few. So, how is anthropology different from these other disciplines?
One way in which anthropology differs from other disciplines is that anthropology is an integrated study of humanity. Anthropologists study human societies as systematic sums of their parts, as integrated wholes. We call this approach holism. For example, many disciplines study marriage, but the anthropologist believes that a full understanding of marriage requires understanding all aspects of the society. Marriage is profoundly influenced by politics and law, economics, ethics, and theology; in turn, marriage influences history, literature, art, and music. The same is true of religious practices and beliefs." (p. 1)
"Perhaps it is best to think of religion as a set of cultural beliefs and practices that usually include some or all of a set of basic characteristics. While not an exhaustive list, it will provide us with an operational definition as we move ahead with our studies of religious systems. These characteristics are as follows:
• a belief in anthropomorphic supernatural beings, such as spirits and gods

• a focus on the sacred supernatural, where sacred refers to a feeling of reverence and awe
• the presence of supernatural power or energy that may be found in supernatural beings as well as physical beings and objects
• the performance of ritual activities that involve the manipulation of sacred objects to communicate with supernatural beings and/or to influence or control events
• an articulation of a worldview and moral code through narratives and other means
• a provision for the creation and maintenance of social bonds and mechanisms of social control within a community
• explanations for the unknown and a sense of control for the individual" (p. 24)

26. Strenski, Ivan. 2010. "Talal Asad's 'Religion' Trouble and a Way Out." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* no. 22:136–155.
Abstract: "By this point, almost everyone is familiar with Talal Asad's assault on the "religion" category.
Despite his influence, Asad's criticisms tend to oscillate between two mutually exclusive positions.
I shall argue that Asad's incoherence is instructive for the field as a whole. The study of religion would be better off constructing useful and revisable definitions of "religion" rather than abandoning the category all together."

27. Stringer, Martin D. 2008. *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*. London: Continuum.
"In this text, therefore, I do not wish to begin with a well-honed and allinclusive definition of what religion is. Rather, I want to draw on empirical studies of ordinary people engaged in everyday life, and in that context to determine what can be defined as 'religion'. There are two principal problems with this proposal, however. The first is methodological and cannot really be answered in advance, and the second is related to the context for the study.
Beginning with the methodological question, there is clearly a problem in identifying that which is 'religious' in the everyday lives of ordinary people if we do not have some preconceived idea of what 'the religious' is. One answer to this problem would be to investigate what the people concerned actually consider to be religious – to look at the 'demotic discourses' of religion among the groups being studied (Baumann 1996: 10). This is what is done in many of the studies I will be drawing upon. That demotic discourse, however, like the academic discourse, has been heavily influenced by Christianity, so what people claim to be 'religious' may not include that which, under a different definition, we may want to include in the category of the religious. As I have already said, I do not think that there is any easy way out of this problem and my solution is actually to shelve it until we come to reinvestigate the questions of definition in the final chapter, after I have presented the studies." (pp. 15-16)
(...)
"I want to suggest that the kind of religion, the particular form of engagement with the non-empirical, that I have been outlining can in some way be understood as the most 'elementary' or 'elemental' form of religion, the ground upon which all other forms are built (Fields 1995: lx). I do not mean that the form of religion I have outlined can be proven to be the earliest form of religion in an evolutionary cycle (although I might, in a different context, want to theorize that it was).
Nor am I suggesting that the form of religion I have presented is necessarily the simplest or least sophisticated form (although once again that may be the case, depending on how we define 'simple' and 'sophisticated'). What I am suggesting, by defining this form of religion as 'elementary', is that it is probably the most widespread and most common form of religion, the form of religion to which human beings revert when all other forms collapse.
These are big claims, which I cannot fully justify in my final chapter.
I want to explore them, through the analysis of various other authors, and present them so that they can be tested by others." (pp. 100-101)
References

Baumann, G. (1996), *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
Fields, K. E. (1995), 'Translator's introduction: religion as an eminently social thing', in E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, xvii–lxxiii

28. Wax, Murray L. 1984. "'Religion' as universal; tribulations of an anthropological enterprise." *Zygon* no. 19:5–20.
Abstract: "The English term religion is used to refer to local Christian churches, their organizations, and their practices. Nevertheless, Western anthropologists have tried to utilize it as if it were a technical term with universal applicability. Anthropologists have sought to characterize religion by several dichotomies, although their own field researches have revealed the irrelevance of such dichotomies as well as the fact that non-Western peoples do not recognize an entity equivalent to religion. Were the characteristics used by anthropologists in defining religion precisely applied to Western societies, then several other kinds of organizations, ceremonials, and practices would have as much, or even greater, claim to being included within the rubric of religion as the Christian and allied churches. The consequence of this conceptual imprecision has been the theoretical stagnation noted by eminent theorists."

29. Winzeler, Robert L. 2012. *Anthropology and Religion: What We Know, Think, and Question*. Lanham: Altamira Press.
Second edition; first edition 2007.
"What is religion? Everyone can give some kind of definition of this term or at least describe the things associated with it, such as believing in God or going to church. But what is religion in terms of the wide range of societies known to anthropology? Is religion as Westerners know it a human universal—something found in all known societies? I have sometimes begun my course on the anthropology of religion by saying that this is a course in something that may not even exist." (p. 1)
(„,)
"Terms for religion hardly exist beyond the world religions and are not necessarily the same within all of them. Neither the Chinese nor the Japanese have a single traditional term that is the simple equivalent of the Western notion of religion. In Chinese the modern term is tsung chiao, which means "doctrine of faith," but according to sociologist C. K. Yang (1991, 2), different traditional terms were used for different systems of belief and practice. There was no single abstract concept that identified religion as a thing itself. Tik-sang Liu (2003, 67) writes similarly that ordinary people in Hong Kong and Macau still have no word for religion: "Many people refer to their religious practices as 'worshipping deities' (baishen) or 'superstition' (mixin). Although people are aware of the negative implications of the word 'superstition' they claim it is the only known term to describe their religious practices."
The situation among the Japanese is much the same. There are different terms for different sorts of religious practices or traditions but nothing for religion in general. At least this was so until a Japanese translation of the English word for religion was developed in the nineteenth century (Reader and Tenabe 1998, 4–5)." (p. 2)
(„,)
"There are two points here. One is that course labels or book titles should not lead us to expect that there is anything out there in comparative terms that closely or explicitly corresponds to what we think it is simply because we have a word for it. The second point is that if we are to pursue an answer to the question of whether all societies have some kind of religion or understand what religion is in some particular society that lacks a word for religion, we need to understand what we mean by religion in the first place. And what we generally mean by religion in modern Western society may not be very useful in broad comparative terms, a matter that will be explored more fully in the next chapter." (pp. 2-3)

Sociology of religion

1. Belier, Wouter W. 1999. "The sacred in the social sciences: On the definition of religion by the *Année sociologique* group." In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, edited by Platvoet, Jan G. and Molendijk, Arie L., 173–206. Leiden: Brill.
"The structure of my investigation into the history of the Durkheimian definition of religion is as follows. I shall firstly briefly outline the political developments in France, against the background of which Durkheimian sociology emerged in the late 19th century. Its rise was closely connected with a widely felt need for an academic analysis of society. I shall then provide data on the *Année sociologique* group of academic 'clients' which Durkheim, as academic patron, gathered around him, following the tradition of the French universities then and now. I shall next analyse Durkheim's *Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse*. This will be by a comparison of the theoretical positions which Durkheim took in 1912, with his earlier work and that of other members of the *Année sociologique* group, in the interest of developing a history of the Durkheimian definition of religion. I shall end by presenting my own conclusions." (p. 175)

2. Bellah, Robert N. 1968. "Religion: The Sociology of Religion." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences: Volume 13*, edited by Sills, David L., 406–414. New York: Macmillan.
"Sociologists have undertaken three main types of religious study. They have studied religion as a central theoretical problem in the understanding of social action. They have studied the relation between religion and other areas of social life, such as economics, politics, and social class. And finally, they have studied religious roles, organizations, and movements. This article will be concerned primarily with the theoretical study of religion and secondarily with the relation between religion and the social structure." (pp. 406-407)
(...)
"An interest in the social consequences of religious belief and action is probably as old as the interest in religion itself. In the sixteenth century Machiavelli gave, in his *Discourses*, a functional analysis of Roman religion which had considerable influence. Spinoza, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Comte continued and developed the analysis of the political significance of religious commitment and the related problems of the influence of religion on personal morality and social solidarity. In one of the earliest quantitative studies in sociology,
Durkheim introduced a "religious variable" in his study of suicide (1897).
Subsequently many studies of varying breadth and quality have included a religious variable and thus advanced our knowledge of the influence or lack of influence of religion on some aspect of social existence; however, a comprehensive survey of the results obtained is still lacking." (p. 412)

3. Berger, Peter Ludwig. 1969. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
Appendix I: *Sociological Definitions of Religion*, pp. 175-177.
"Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established (34). Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience (35). This quality may be attributed to natural or artificial objects, to animals, or to men, or to the objectivations of human culture. There are sacred rocks, sacred tools, sacred cows. The chieftain may be sacred, as may be a particular custom or institution. Space and time may be assigned the same quality, as in sacred localities and sacred seasons. The quality may finally be embodied in sacred beings, from highly localized spirits to the great cosmic divinities. The latter, in turn, may be transformed into ultimate forces or principles ruling the cosmos, no longer conceived of in personal terms but still endowed with the status of sacredness. The historical manifestations of the

sacred vary widely, though there are certain uniformities to be observed cross-culturally (no matter here whether these are to be interpreted as resulting from cultural diffusion or from an inner logic of man's religious imagination). The sacred is apprehended as "sticking out" from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life. Although the sacred is apprehended as other than man, yet it refers to man, relating to him in a way in which other non-human phenomena (specifically, the phenomena of non-sacred nature) do not. The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order." (p. 25)
(34) (34) This definition is derived from Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. For a discussion of the problem of defining religion in a sociological context, cf. Appendix I. Religion is defined here as a human enterprise because this is how it manifests itself as an empirical phenomenon. Within this definition the question as to whether religion may also be something more than that remains bracketed, as, of course, it must be in any attempt at scientific understanding.
(35) For a clarification of the concept of the sacred, cf. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige* (Munich, Beck, 1963); Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1938); Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1957). The dichotomy of the sacred and the profane is used by Durkheim in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, Collier Books, 1961).

4. Beyer, Peter. 1998. "The Religious System of Global Society: A Sociological Look at Contemporary Religion and Religions." *Numen* no. 45:1–29.
Summary: "Controversies within religious studies over the categories of religion and religions are reflective of changes in religion that correspond to the historical development of global society in recent centuries. The globalization of society has created social conditions that encourage the differentiation of religion as a distinct modality of social communication based on binary codes and centred on institutionalized programmes that flow from these. The result has been the gradual construction and imagining of an ambiguous but nonetheless observable and operative global religious system. From its beginnings in early modem Western Christianity, the system has spread haltingly and gradually to the rest of the world. Similar to the way the spread of the global political system brought about the discovery and construction of nations, the development of the religious system has resulted in the crystallization of 'religions,' especially but not exclusively what we now call the world religions.
The examples of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Chinese religion are discussed briefly as illustration."

5. Bruce, Steve. 2018. *Researching Religion: Why We Need Social Science*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Chapter 3: *Defining Religion*, pp. 39-69.
"Conclusion
In reviewing common arguments about definitions, I have made the following points. Philosophically minded scholars spend too much time agonizing over the correct way to define religion (if they permit that such a thing exists). While it is quite proper to be interested in the functions of religion, defining religion in terms of its supposed uses or consequences is unhelpful. It is also unworkable, as is demonstrated by the fact that supposed functionalists actually fall back on substantive definitions. As there is little hope of (or need to) develop sociological concepts that do not rest on common usage, a substantive definition of religion that fits pretty well with the way ordinary people use these terms seems entirely adequate for social scientists who do not aspire to grand ‘theories of ’ religion. It is actually not difficult to define religion, spirituality, or the secular provided we do not expect such master abstractions to do all our conceptual work. I have also

argued that very few arguments in recent social science studies of religion have hinged on competing definitions of our subject matter.
(...)
Provided we hold consistently to the principle of methodological agnosticism and are not drawn into debates about the truth or falsity of religion, religion is no more or less difficult to define than any other social phenomenon." (pp. 65-66)

6. Dobbelaere, Karel. 2011. "The contextualization of definitions of religion." *International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie* no. 21:191–204.
Abstract: "The author insists on the need to take the social-structural context into account to evaluate the existing types of definitions of religion. Proposing a definition for the Western hemisphere, he then checks his definition against sociological studies referring to 'new types of religiosity' and concludes that sociologists should differentiate between meaning systems - of which religion is a sub-division - and spiritualities. In a second step, he discusses two sociological theories about religion and insists that sociologists should be more careful in using such theories by taking into consideration the type of religion the theory is concerned with.
Finally, he suggests that rational choice theory and secularization theory might well be integrated and applied in a European context if we move to the level of the competing existing meaning systems."

7. Dobbelaere, Karel, and Lauwers, Jan. 1979. "Definition of Religion - A Sociological Critique." *Social Compass*:535–551.
"Sociologists who study religion have always been confronted with the difficult problem of defining their material object. Durkheim made at least one attempt before publishing his study on the elementary forms
of religious life,(1) and in his book the first question he starts with is the definition of religious phenomena and of religion.(2) Most introductory textbooks in the sociology of religion start with a chapter on the definition of religion. Weber, on the other hand, states: "to define 'religion', to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the 'conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior."(3) However, the particular type of social behavior had to be specified. This is what Weber implicitly did. De facto, as Berger, writes, "Weber follows the definition of the scope of religion current in the *Religionswissenschaft* of this time." (4)
Explicitly or implicitly every sociologist of religion seems to have worked with a definition of religion. In this paper we will study the major types of definitions of religion used in the sociology of religion and
their influence on sociological research." (p. 536)
(1) E. Durkheim, "De la définition des phènoménes religieux", in *L'Année Sociologique*, 1898, 1-28.
(2) E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris, P.U.F., quatrième éd., 1960, 31-66.
(3) M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1963, 1.
(4) P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1967, 176.

8. Droogers, André. 2009. "Defining Religion: A Social Science Approach." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Clarke, Peter B., 263–279. New York: Oxford University Press.
"To bring some order into the complex variety of views on defining religion, I follow Guba (1990: 18), who distinguishes three dimensions in any scientific activity. Tried and tested as this classic subdivision is, it should help us to coverand uncover, as completely as is possible in this short chapter, the various aspects of defining religion.

. The first dimension regards the ontological aspects of defining religion: ‘What can be said about the nature of religion?’ This is the heart of the matter. What are the parameters for deciding on the nature of religion?
. The second dimension is epistemological, and the corresponding question is: ‘What is the relation of the definer with religion as the phenomenon to be defined?’ This question regards questions of distance and closeness, observation and participation, objectivity and subjectivity.
. The third dimension is methodological in nature, regarding the way in which the definer should technically proceed when defining religion. It concerns what a definition is meant to do, and how the elements that are exclusively religious are selected.
In describing the three dimensions, both the maps and the cartographers must be considered. As will immediately be evident, the three dimensions cannot be viewed in strict isolation, because they influence each other, and in fact form a triangle. The definer’s views on religion cannot be separated from the way in which religion is represented and from the form the definition is given. Even those who refuse to define religion position themselves within the parameters of these three dimensions. In the final section the picture that appears when the three dimensions are considered is summarized. The net result of the efforts to define religion will reveal an impasse that tells us more about the definers as blind men around the elephant than about religion. I will suggest that if religion is a construct, the constructors should be viewed as part of the phenomenon, and therefore also of the definition." (p. 264)

9. Goody, Jack. 1961. "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem." *The British Journal of Sociology* no. 12:142–164.
"In this paper I want to explore the problem of what is involved in categorizing acts and beliefs as religious, or ritual,or magico-religious, with the purpose not only of clearing the way for subsequent treatment of my own empirical data concerning the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana, but also of clarifying certain aspects of the analysis of social systems in general." (p. 142)
(...)
"The conclusion of this summary of the argument leads directly to the final portion of this paper, which consists of an attempt to suggest more definite ways of using not only the concepts of 'religion' and 'ritual', but also that of 'ceremonial', for it is this, I have claimed, that Durkheim identifies with religious activity. To begin with 'religion', it is significant that in one of the most thoughtful of recent contributions to the study of the religion of a non-literate people, Evans-Pritchard has defined his field of discourse in Tylorian terms. With all its limitations this definition appears to offer the nearest approach to a resolution of our problem." (p. 157)

10. Horii, Mitsutoshi. 2022. "‘Religion’ in the Sociology of Religion." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* no. 35:70–82.
Abstract: "This article is a critique on the concept ‘religion’ in sociology. It interrogates specific assumptions which shape this category. In order to put my argument forward in a clear way, the first section of this article historicises the concept ‘religion.’ This is followed by the comparison between racial categories and the category of religion in a variety of sociology textbooks. Sociologists generally treat racial categories as a fiction which was historically invented to serve Euro-American colonialism and attempt to study the on-going consequences of racial categorisation. In the same way, this article suggests, sociologists should approach the concept ‘religion’ as an ideological category, and they should examine the process of collective representation in which the category ‘religion’ is utilised to serve specific norms and interests."

11. Launay, Robert. 2022. "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared." *Religions* no. 13:1–13.
Abstract: "Emile Durkheim began *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* with an injunction: “In order to identify the simplest and most primitive religion that

observation can make known to us, we must first define what is properly understood as a religion". Almost simultaneously, Max Weber would begin the long section on the sociology of religion in his unfinished work *Economy and Society* by insisting, "To define 'religion', to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study" (1978, p. 399).
Durkheim's insistence and Weber's reticence are equally surprising. By and large, Durkheim's writings are relatively sparing of definitions. He did not generally bother to define words that were already in common currency. "Religion" is unquestionably the most notable counterexample. On the other hand, Weber was far more scrupulous—one might even say obsessive—about defining terms that were not specifically his own, including "capitalism", "class", and "bureaucracy" to select only a few examples. Durkheim's long disquisition on the definition of "religion" was as radically atypical of his *modus operandi* as was Weber's avoidance. The question of religion's definition provides a fruitful window into their opposing analyses of non-European societies as a means of characterizing European modernity, ways that derive in important respects from early modern depictions of "savages" and "Orientals"."
References
Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press
Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*. 2 vols. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

12. Matthes, Joachim. 2000. "Religion in the social sciences: a socio-epistemological critique." *Akademika* no. 56:85–105.
Abstract: "In the effort to conceptualise social phenomena, social scientists are faced with the fundamental epistemological problem of having to translate cultural terms into scientific concepts, in the course of which the cultural contexts in which such terms are embedded are offen neglected, or even systematically excluded This can result in a 'loss of reality', and a corresponding danger of misinterpretation, in particular in cross-cultural and comparative studies. In this paper, this epistemological problem is discussed with respect to the concept of religion. For this purpose, the specific period of European cultural history in which this concept emerged, as well as the trajectories of its generalisation to a concept which appears to be universally applicable, is reconstructed and described. At the same time, an attempt is made to show how the original cultural meanings of the term have survived the efforts to generalise it, and how the concept of 'religion' as it is commonly used in the social sciences today still carries a hidden cultural load which could bias theory construction and empirical research. The paper argues for a methodology of 'heightened reflexivity' towards the cultural histoy of the core concepts which in the social sciences tend to be used in a definitory fashion."

13. McGuire, Meredith B. 2003. "Contested meanings and definitional boundaries: historicizing the sociology of religion." In *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular*, edited by Greil, Arthur and Bromley, David G., 127–138. Oxford: Elsevier Science.
"Conclusion
If we fail to recognize the contested nature of definitional boundaries, we risk reifying (relatively) recent institutional configurations. Sociology needs to historicize not only its debates about secularization (Carroll, 1995; Gorski, 2000), but also its use of core concepts defining religion and religiosity. How can we understand the changing place of religion in society if our very definitional boundaries result from some of those changes we hope to analyze? Do these historically and culturally bound conceptual limits prevent us from adequately understanding non-European religious expressions — especially popular religion and other indigenous religious expression not made in the image of modern Euro-American "religion?" Are there parallels with contemporary contests over the relevant boundaries of "religion?" Are there important differences today, compared

with early Modern times, in the locus of structural power — especially the power to define the terms of discourse about religion?" (p. 136)
References
Carroll, M. P. (1995). Rethinking popular Catholicism in pre-famine Ireland. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34(3), 354-365.
Gorski, P. S. (2000). Historicizing the secularization debate: Church, state, and society in the late medieval and early modern Europe, ca 1300 to 1700. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 138-167.

14. McKinnon, Andrew M. 2002. "Sociological definitions, language games, and the 'essence' of religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* no. 14:61–83.
Abstract: "Sociologists of religion have long debated the definition of religion. In this article, I survey the debate and find a partially hidden consensus. This debate, in conjunction w.th recent criticisms of the concept "religion" in religious studies, and by drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of language games, provides helpful pointers for developing a non-essentialist conception of religion. I argue that "religion" (as a phenomenon and as a concept) is a historical and social construction, but that this does not require us to dispense with the concept altogether."

15. Spickard, James V. 2007. "'Religion' in Global Culture: New Directions in an Increasingly Self-Conscious World." In *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, edited by Beyer, Peter and Beaman, Lori, 233–252. Leiden: Brill.
"To the degree that globalization weakens states in the international system, and to the degree that people find themselves under threat because of that weakness—as they especially do in semi-peripheral and peripheral regions—it makes sense for them to turn to ideologies that draw firm boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Religious sectarianism is akin to ethnic nationalism in its promise of secure group membership for the chosen. It is also like such nationalism in its claim that people outside its own group do not matter.
If my analysis of the cultural logic of third-generation human rights is at all valid, globalization should favor the growth of multiple religions in the core regions of the world economic system. There, economic integration has progressed far enough to allow multiple localisms. These provide their adherents with a sense of identity without threatening either of the social pillars of the global order: individual differentiation and globe-spanning socio-economic networks The situation in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions is somewhat different. There, declining state power exposes people to threats against which they construct religious and/or ethnic primordialisms.
These do not solve their problems; indeed, they leave people open to demagoguery. But such communalisms bring hope and common purpose in a world that seems organized for others' benefit.
On both a social and a cultural level, religious 'fundamentalism' and ethnic nationalism may well have more in common than we suspect." (pp.249-250, a note omitted)

16. Woodhead, Linda. 2011. "Five concepts of religion." *International Review of Sociology Revue Internationale de Sociologie* no. 21:121–143.
Abstract: "In the face of continuing debate about the adequacy and definition of the concept of 'religion', this paper argues that it is necessary for the social sciences to become more self-critical about their various - and changing - uses of the term. As this paper shows, three main uses are currently dominant: religion as belief/meaning, religion as identity, and religion as structured social relations. By contrast, some uses which were once important are currently recessive, including Marxist approaches to religion as ideology, and Parsonian conceptions of religion as norms and values. Some new uses are also emerging, including 'material' religion, religion as discourse, and religion as practice. Drawing these together, the paper proposes a taxonomy of five main major uses of the term. It reflects on their adequacy, and points out where there are still occlusions: above all with regard to

'super-social' or 'meta-social' relations with non-human or quasi-human beings, forces and powers."

17. Yamane, David, Roberts, Keith A., and M., Hart Jonas. 2026. *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. London: Sage.
Eighth edition.
Chapter 1: *What Do We Mean by the Term Religion?*, pp. 3-24.
"The Concept of Religion as Employed in This Text
In attempting to present a comprehensive sociological perspective on religion, our approach is to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, rather than dichotomizing religion from non religion, sacred from profane, visible from invisible, official from lived, spiritual from religious, we seek to explore anything that provides meaning and purpose in the lives of people. We ask *how* people are religious rather than *wether* they are religious. Hence, the perspective of this book will be most compatible with the comprehensive symbolic definition of Geertz, although we also incorporate the research and insight of those who use a broader functional definition or a narrower substantive definition of religion.
To summarize, we maintain that religion is an interdependent system by which a community of people are bonded by:
• a shared meaning system (a faith or a worldwiew);
• a set of myths (beliefs), rituals, and symbol systems that sacralize the meaning system for the members;
• a sense of belonging to some group;
• a system of ethics or values that is directive in the lives of the members; and
• a set of routinized social expectations and patterns.
At the same time, we: hope that these criteria for identifying religion are sufficiently broad so that we do not miss the religious significance of nontraditional groups and even less organized spiritual movements. We will be studiyng Methodists, Muslims, and Moonies, but this approach also allows us to explore beJly dancing, skareboarding, and Scientology as religious practices that can impact traditional religion and that may well be emerging as new religions," (p. 21)