The Study of Religion – Thoughts on Approaches

By

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What is culture?

Emphasizing process and practices, I use the term *culture* to describe shared but unevenly distributed meanings among the members of a sociologically defined group. These shared meanings organize and regulate social practices, influence behaviour and consequently have real-practical effects, since concerns about meaning typify human behaviour far back into prehistory – the point in time we went tribal – and therefore meaning is related to values. In its most basic sense culture is the shared experience and value system of a group, the aspect of thought and behaviour that is learned, capable of being taught to others and created by individuals.

Cultures consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including images or encodements and their

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interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations to contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves[2].

Kevin Avruch differentiates between generic and local culture: Generic culture refers to "*universal attributes of human behaviour – to human nature; it denotes a species-specific attribute of homo sapiens, an adaptive feature of human beings for at least a million years.*"[3] Generic culture as a biological program for survival provides for and generates the base of highly specific local matrixes. Culture is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us but which carry meaning and value for us, which are meaningfully interpreted by others, or which depend on meaning for their effective operation. Meanings regulate and organize cultural conduct and practices – they help to set rules, norms, and conventions by which social life is ordered in response to geographic and historic environments. Consequently, local culture refers to complex systems of particular meanings (representational systems) created, shared, experienced, and socially inherited in particular social groups – but unevenly distributed among its individuals providing room for change. As result, I understand local cultures as suppliers of varying solutions to life problems providing distinct social practices. I see local cultures as individually uneven distributed, socially transmitted solutions to life problems, which are situational, flexible, and responsive to geo-social environments created by permanent changes in space and time.

What is Religion?

"*(T)here is no consensus, perhaps there will never be as to what counts as religion*", says Jose Casanova[4]. The question '*What is a religion*' as a somehow identifiably phenomenon distinct from other elements of daily life (the domain we call culture or history) relates to the question '*What is the study of religion?*'[5] and to legal efforts defining rights of groups and individuals bound by a shared faith, differing in faith or having no faith at all. Legislators for example can hardly indulge in hesitant thoughts or philosophical debates – they must define the rights of people classified as religious, spiritual, and atheist.

During the Enlightenment, the academic study of religion has been developed by scholars in Europe since the late nineteenth-century. Scholars tried to understand what motivates humans to engage in religion, consequently the Bible was no longer strictly a matter of theological and devotional study, and the Hindu and Buddhist texts were

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[2] Cf. Theodore Schwartz 1992, *Anthropology and psychology*: an unrequited relationship, in: New directions in psychological anthropology, ed. by Theodore Schwartz, Geoffrey M. White, and Catharine A. Lutz, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 324

[3] Cf. Kevin Avruch 1998, *Culture. Conflict & Resolution*, Washington D.C., U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 10; emphasis in original.

[4] Cf. Jose Casanova, 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World,* Chicago and London, University Of Chicago Press, 26

[5] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *Conclusion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelconclusion.html

first being translated into European languages. Today, those scholars are also considered the intellectual founders of religious studies and academic disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and psychology. The study of religion must be distinguished from theological or confessional approaches. The study of religion pursues a naturalist approach outside any theological/confessional viewpoint of religion – its object of study are human beliefs, behaviours, and institutions in the field of religion, but not the actions of the gods, God or divine agents. In comparison, theology means any rational and systematic study by members of a particular religion concerning the divine source of their tradition, their own tradition's meaning, belief or proper practice, or their tradition's view of others. Consequently, naturalistic theories of religion do not presume that the basis of religion is to be found in a supernatural source but that those beliefs, behaviours, or institutions classified as "religious" are in fact elements of human history and culture. In this sense, "natural" is linked to the systematic study of the empirical (observable with one of the five senses) world.[6]

Does religion have an essence – or is it a function of human behaviour? Sir E. B. Tylor developed an early technical definition of religion as an element of human history and culture and as universal human feature of humanity: "*A rudimentary definition of religion ... seems best to fall back at once on this essential source … belief in Spiritual Beings.*"[7] E. B. Tylor's work and definition give an example of an essentialist theory (also termed substantivist or monothetic): it identifies the one essential feature (or substance) without which something would not be what it is. E. B. Tylor understood animism [Latin *anima*, meaning life, soul] as the earliest form of religion and the base for all religions – the universal belief in spiritual beings. Belief in spiritual beings was the "essential source" for all religions. In his minimalist definition we see the common emphasis on religion as an essentially private, intellectual activity (that is, religion equals *believing in* this or that) rather than an emphasis on the behavioural or the social components.[8]

Emile Durkheim says religion is the product of human activity, not divine intervention. He treats religion as a social fact. Durkheim emphasized public ritual and institution – thus the functional aspects of religion. Functionalists are people interested in asking what something *does* rather than what it *is*. Durkheim's often quoted definition says:

"*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden–beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (…) In showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church* [community bound by

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[6] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *Definitions, Naturalistic Theories of Religion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama,http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutreldefinitions.html

[7] Cf. E.B. Tylor 1871, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. Vol. 1, London: John Murray, 424

[8] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *The essentials of religion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelessentials.html

shared faith, AL]*, it conveys the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing.*"[9]

There are, thus, three fundamental elements to every religion: sacred objects, a set of beliefs and practices, and the existence of a moral community[10]. According to Emile Durkheim, a religion comes into being and is legitimated through moments of "collective effervescence" – moments in social life when the group of individuals that forms a group, community or society comes together in order to perform a religious ritual[11]. During these moments, the group communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals[12]. Intertwined sets of beliefs and practices enable individuals to form the idea of a common social identity; for Emile Durkheim, claims about religion were coded claims about the social group. In consequence, religion is real[13]. Why? Emile Durkheim argues, the very social forces that animate a group's, community's, or society's religious life are real, and are really felt by its constituent members. While the individual erroneously assumes that this power emanates directly from or is somehow intrinsic to the sacred object, a living and concrete reality is established behind the symbol: the power of society[14]. Consequently, in Emile Durkheims view, all religions are true, because they express "a power that *does* exist, the power of society"[15]. In the functional perspective, religion functions to build and retain group identity without asking for the source of ritual practices and social structures.

The Anthropologist Clifford Geertz then defined religion in the broadest sense as a cultural system through which fundamental problems of existence are expressed and managed. With reference to his emphasis on symbols, Clifford Geertz defines religion as

1.) a system of symbols which acts to 2.) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3.) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4.) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5.) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[16]

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[9] Cf. Emile Durkheim 1995 (1912) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: The Totemic System in Australia*, new translation by Karen E. Fields, Free Press (London: George Allen & Unwin), 44

[10] Cf. P. Carls, 2012, *Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/

[11] Cf. P. Carls, 2012, *Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/

[12] Cf. P. Carls, 2012, *Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/

[13] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *The functions of religion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelfunctions.html

[14] Cf. P. Carls, 2012, *Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/

[15] Cf. P. Carls, 2012, *Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/

[16] Cf. Clifford Geertz, 1973 (1964), *The Interpretation of Cultures,* New York: Basic Books, 63

Systems of symbols are models that act as models of reality and models for reality[17]. Clifford Geertz regards religions as particular cultural solutions to universal problems of meaning. Since problems of meaning are experienced by cultural actors only in the context of social systems and social institutions, religions as cultural systems are impressed by the institutional conditions of their construction.

In conclusion, I interpret religion by reference to biological, sociological and cultural factors, since culture overlays biological substructures and social structures with meaning systems that are both motivating and to a certain degree arbitrary. The human capacity for religious thought and experience has its foundation in the human biological substructure, but it can only come to full expression with cultural inputs and processes within a social structure. Religions contain derivatives of experience, systems of knowledge and social bondage forces; in this they provide socially transmitted and inherited solutions to life problems (survival and reproduction) and specific ways of life. Basically, culture and religion are to be understood as adaptation to the environment and as devices for survival and reproduction.

The study of religion

The question *What is religion?* is intimately related to the idea that the phenomena called religion can be studied – consequently, we need to answer the question *What is the study of religion?* too. In order to answer the question *What is a religion?* we should consider following facts:

1. There is no 'objective' definition of religion – definitions of religions are always subjectively related to either confessional or naturalist mindsets
2. a definition of religion always reflects the geographical, cultural, historical, economic and political context
3. religious ideas are distributed unevenly among the individuals of a faith group
4. a definition must be properly formulated in order to observe the required (academic, legal, civic, political) purpose at hand

The relevant question in the study of religion is less *What is religion*, but *What gets to count as religion and why – and above all, who is to decide? Who has the authority to define what is and what is not a religion? Who has the authority to draft definitions, especially legal ones, which has immediate impact on peoples' life, and who has the authority to reject or neglect those definitions?* Therefore, one should elucidate how 'religion' gets identified and defined, by whom, for what purpose, and under what socio-political conditions. In our case, the question *What is the study of religion?* might best be answered by asking *Where is the study of religion practiced, by whom, and for what purposes?*[18]

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[17] Cf. Clifford Geertz, 1973 (1964), *The Interpretation of Cultures,* New York: Basic Books, 93
[18] Cf. Michel Picard 2013, *What is religion*, Lecture delivered at Hindu University of Indonesia, March 6th, 2013; http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html

The study of religion is the disciplined inquiry of one aspect of human cultural practices having changing historic contexts – an aspect identified, for the purposes of *our* study as particular religion as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, tribal religion etc, by the definition *we* choose to use, a definition that suits *our* purposes[19]. What unites us into this collective group or *us* is the institutional setting of a public university and our curiosity into the subject matter of Hinduism.[20]

"*While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, [...] must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.*" [21]

The study of religion is sometimes located at theological faculties, sometimes it is a field within a major discipline as anthropology, or it is investigated within religious studies. Thus we find amongst others phenomenology of religion, anthropology of religion, philosophy of religion, history of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, feministic study of religion, cognitive studies of religion, socio-biological study of religion. Religious studies classify five types of religions today:

1. the major traditions (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist)
2. the minor traditions (Jaina, Sikh, Tao, Confucian, Zoroastrism)
3. historical traditions which do not exist anymore (Gnostic, Manichaeism, Roman and Greek religion, Maya, Inca, Aztek)
4. indigenous religions (oral traditions, focus on mythos, ritual)
5. new religious movements (Bahai, Mormon, etc.)
6. secular religions (nationalism, humanism, Marxism)

Thus, religion is "*a taxonomic device*", which "*has to do with the construction and maintenance of boundaries. Accordingly, scholars of religion should investigate how this taxonomy works, that is, what it includes and what it excludes*"[22].

In addition, not all individuals within a faith group share the same ideas what their religion is about. Thus in the study of religion, we ask what solutions to life problems

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[19] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *Conclusion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelconclusion.html

[20] Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon 2007, *Conclusion*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelconclusion.html

[21] Jonathan Z. Smith, 1982, *Imagining religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Xi

[22] Cf. Michel Picard 2013, *What is religion*, Lecture delivered at Hindu University of Indonesia, March 6th, 2013

are provided, and when and why, by whom to map the phenomena we chose to classify as religion.

The question of unity or diversity

The idea that religions share a common essence – the universal belief in spiritual beings or a mind-independent reality – inspired the work of scholars of religion who attempt to identify the deep similarities among the world's religions – an effort that generally goes by the name of religious pluralism, inter-religious dialogue or plural theory of religions. Giving a covert confessional and essentialist definition of religion, Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda writes:

"*The fundamentals or essentials of all religions are the same. There is difference only in the non-essentials. The apparent differences in religions are due to a misconception or misconstruction of the long-forgotten truth of the Vedas on which they are ultimately founded. All systems of religion are equally divine and true. The conflicting points are all due to misconception and misconstruction of truths on account of prejudice, bigotry, lack of purity of heart and subtlety and purity of intellect, and perverted condition of the intellect of people.*"[23]

Stephen Prothero argues Vivekananda's statement would display a "*lovely sentiment – but it is dangerous, disrespectful and untrue.*"[24] I would even add it is fundamental – not all religions are founded in the Veda, consequently concerning the question of truth a somehow hegemonic mindset puts the Veda as highest authority. This is a very questionable statement. By tolerating others but assuming ourselves as superior, we do not gain a deepened and profound understanding of each other nor do we foster respect towards each other. We all might think of examples of representatives in all religions to hold standpoints like this that deepen and prolong constructed boundaries and exclusivity and thereby nurture misunderstanding, dispute and conflict. Stephen Prothero continues:

"*One of the most common misperceptions about the world's religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not. [...] Every religion [...] asks after the human condition. Here we are in these human bodies. What now? What next? What are we to become?*"[25]

Stephen Prothero then stresses that "*The world's religious rivals do converge when it comes to ethics, but they diverge sharply on doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience,*

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[23] http://www.dlshq.org/religions/unirel.htm
[24] Stephen Prothero 2010, *God is not one. The eight rival religions that Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper Collins, 24
[25] Stephen Prothero 2010, *God is not one. The eight rival religions that Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper Collins, 24

and law. These differences may not matter to mystics or philosophers of religion, but they matter to ordinary people."[26]

Indeed, we do not find differences only in doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience and law between religions, but also within a particular religious tradition. Not one religion can be regarded as monolithic entity – religion always comes in the plural –

1. historically, we observe changes in thought, behaviour, meaning, institutional and social structures,
2. culturally, we find different religions, that is Catholic, Hindu or Muslim tradition
3. individually, religious representations are unevenly distributed in individuals and individuals have different religious experiences

In consequence, in all religions we observe specific genealogies of thought and imagination, interpretations or paths social groups and individuals constructed and chose to follow at a specific location and for a certain time. Each path denotes a particular system of knowledge and practices – converging, diverging or contradicting other paths that have been classified as belonging to the same religion. We see that paths either coexist, or compete with each other, or wage war.

To gain a profound knowledge and therewith mutual respect of others, we must be able to accept their thoughts and behaviour as being on the same level as ours, even if we do not understand them or agree with them. Acceptance is the basis for respect which is more than just benevolent dialogue. Acceptance and respect cannot be achieved by mere dialogue, but by sensible translation and painful decoding of the meanings, thoughts, concepts and behaviour of the "others" and comparing and relating them to our meanings, thoughts, concepts and behaviour. Doing this, we are threatened with the painful task to repeatedly call into question our own truth, values, identity and construction of boundaries. Still, because religions are poly-sound – there is no religious tradition to my knowledge which is a monolithic bloc – indicating that religions contain various voices, perspectives or paths to be chosen – if we are if motivated to do so, we are surely able to construct a common inter-faith and cultural ground. Besides, humans as agents make choices – they have the right to self-determination, individually, socially, institutionally – again, who is to decide when, why whether a particular choice or paths is right or wrong? The only guideline we have is that as human species we have a symbiotic relationship with nature and each other, we are not separate entities, we depend on each other and earth, in the end we just share one planet, and if we expect to survive and prosper we need to find a just model for a common ground that fits all perspectives.

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[26] Stephen Prothero 2010, *God is not one. The eight rival religions that Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper Collins, 24

Religion as the confrontation with the problem of existence

Culture and religion are socio-cultural and biological process to forge group solidarity, secure group survival and stimulate feelings in the individual. Accordingly, religions are real in the Durkheimian sense. This universal or generic capability of human beings to form socio –cultural traditions, which manifest in social structures and shape specific genealogies of thought and imagination (representations), is addressed by Edmund Weber. He defines religion as a process originating in human nature, precisely "*the incessant confrontation of the human mind with the problem of existence.*"[27]

"*Religion signifies (…) in its true meaning human mind's incessant confrontation with its problem of existence, our evolutionarily developed free self-consciousness leads to our experience of existence as being ultimately indeterminable, but at the same time we must determine our very existence creatively and responsibly within this indeterminableness.*"[28]

Accordingly to Edmund Weber then, religion does not represent final solutions, but it represents

The constant pragmatic discourse originating out of the problematic constitution of human existence. Everyone leads this confrontation whether consciously or unconsciously. In this sense, religion is not merely a possibility among others, but an absolute necessity. It is therefore not a matter of individuals, but of all humanity. Everyone has religion or whatever we may term this confrontation.[29]

Since we all participate in the process of confrontation with the problematic constitution of human existence (religion), every human has religion, and religion concerns not just a few people, but all of us. Overlaying biological substructures, religion as confrontation with the problem of existence has been historically and socially constructed in discursive processes according to human needs in a particular historical context to provide modes for self-determination. Accordingly, religion is both a personal matter and individual practice (it is private) and a social reality or societal institution (it is collective).

As result of human confrontation with the irresolvable capability for existential closure, human beings try to absolutize specific modes of self-determination, or ortho-

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[27] Edmund Weber 2009, *Religionsfreiheit und Kooperation. Zum institutionellen Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche in Deutschland und europäischen Ländern,* Journal für Religionskultur Nr. 124, 1, (own translation), http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/relkultur124.pdf

[28] Edmund Weber 2009, *Religionsfreiheit und Kooperation. Zum institutionellen Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche in Deutschland und europäischen Ländern*, Journal für Religionskultur Nr. 124, 1 (own translation), http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/relkultur124.pdf

[29] Edmund Weber 2008, *Individuelle Religionsfreiheit und die moderne Gestaltung der Religionskultur*. In: Journal für Religionskultur Nr. 104, 1 (own translation), http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/relkultur104.pdf

doxies. Whether portrayed as religious, atheistic, or rational; such orthodoxies tend, even if such efforts are eventually in vain, to resort to violence in limiting or even extinguishing the evolutionary accrued and unchangeable *Geistesfreiheit* (freedom of consciousness) of human beings. In spite of the ever victorious orthodoxisms, the lore of evolutionary induced indeterminableness of existence rekindles in human awareness time after time, revolutionizing reified self-determinations and clearing the passage for alternative models.[30]

Religions have phenomenological, structural, functional, semantic, pragmatic, psychological, sociological and biological and environmental aspects. They are temporary and unique expressions of the individual or the collective; and since they construct the very conditions for their coming into "effect", they contain the necessary possibility of negation and extinction of their existence at the same time. Therefore all cultures –also the cultures we call great world religions – are multivocally – insofar as they contain many divergent voices which might range from a pro- to an anti-attitude. Religion is an active process of environmental adaptation of individuals and groups and a discursive process of reifying and in turn rebelling against reified structures, adjusting them and thereby keeping the answer of human species to environment, to each other and perhaps a mind-independent reality actualized in rejuvenating religion in accordance with situation, time and space.

Approach to the study of religions

As scholars of religion we inquire into the answers particular religious paths supply for this confrontation. In consequence, we need to discuss the definition and approach we use in isolating our object of investigation. I think a combination of a polythetic definition with an emic-descriptive, four-part approach to beliefs and practices shared by many believers into a certain tradition at specific spaces, times and situations is the best approach to make sense of the phenomena.

1. A polythetic definition.

As I tried to outline earlier, we find essentialist and functional definitions of religions that are either monothetic or polythetic. The term – monothethic or polythethic - derive from Greek for either one, alone (*mono-*) or many, much (*poly-*) that are "capable of placing", as in one-placement and many-placements. Monothetic definitions presume a limited set of necessary characteristics or purposes, whereas polythetic definitions identify a range of traits or functions, none of which is sufficient in order for the object to qualify as a member of a class.[31]

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[30] Cf. Edmund Weber 2009, *Religionsfreiheit und Kooperation*, Journal für Religionskultur Nr. 124, 1 (own translation), http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/relkultur124.pdf. Edmund Weber 2008, *Individuelle Religionsfreiheit und die moderne Gestaltung der Religionskultur*, Journal für Religionskultur Nr. 104, 1 (own translation), http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/relkultur104.pdf

[31] Cf. Russell T McCutcheon 2007, *Definitions, Monothetic and Polythetic Definitions*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutreldefinitions.html

The family resemblance approach to definition, also called polythetic definition, shall provide a middle path between essentialist and functionalist approaches. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) has advanced the idea first: he argued that there is no one defining characteristic that makes something a language. He found that all members of a common group overlap to varying degrees and in differing respects, just as no two members of a family are exactly alike (even identical twins); instead, they more or less share a delimited series of characteristics (such as name, hair colour, temperament, height, favourite foods, blood type, etc.). Wittgenstein used the expression family resemblance to characterize these similarities. Further, despite their best efforts to portray themselves as authoritative, no family member constitutes the definitive instance of the group–rather, all members share in the identity, to varying degrees. Group membership, Wittgenstein argued, is never a matter of yes or no (as in the essentialist approach) but always a matter of degree, a matter of "more or less."[32]

2. An emic and descriptive approach.

"*(R)eligion takes such widely different forms and is interpreted in such widely different ways*", Catholic philosopher of Religion, John Hick states, "*that it cannot be adequately defined but only described.*"[33] Based on the actor-centered perspective, the emic strategy provides microscopic and context-specific in-depth analyses and "thick descriptions".[34] Each religious tradition has been influenced by cultural and historical forces which in turn rest upon a complex of geographical, climatic, economic, and political factors. According to the anthropologist Talal Asad, it is required for scholars to determine what they mean by religion on a case-by-case basis. Talal Asad holds "*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.*"[35]

3. Stephen Prothero's four part approach to religions

Stephen Prothero holds every religion articulates
1.   a problem
2.   a solution to this problem, which also serves as religious goal
3.   a technique(s) for moving from the problem to this solution

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[32] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein 2001, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing; Wendy Doninger O'Flaherty, 2010, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, New York: Penguin Press; Stephen Prothero 2010, *God is not one. The eight rival religions that Run the World -- and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper Collins, 24; http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html

[33] John Hick, 1992, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 5

[34] The concept of thick description has been introduced by Clifford Geertz 1973 (1964), *The Interpretation of Cultures,* New York: Basic Books

[35] Talal Azad, 1993, *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 29

4.   an exemplar(s) who chart this path from problem to solution[36]

Summary

By organizing the approach to religion historically, we trace the evolution, diffusion, and genealogies of ideas and themes and how those ideas have been inspired or configured by the events of times and human agency in looking at selected texts, actors, and themes.[37] In other words, we inquire into the articulated problem of existence, its solutions, techniques and examples on a case-to-case basis contextualizing specific texts, actors and themes by relating them to time, space and situations.

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[36] Stephen Prothero, 2010, *God is not one. The eight rival religions that Run the World -- and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper Collins, 14
[37] Cf. Wendy Doninger O'Flaherty, 2010, *The Hindus: An Alternative History,* New York: Penguin Press