CrossMark

What Does the Study of Religion Study?*

Kevin Schilbrack
Appalachian State University

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars in the academic study of religion made what we might call "the reflexive turn," in that they picked up the tools of genealogy, deconstruction, and post-colonial studies and they began in earnest to reflect critically on their own conceptual categories. Where did the very concept of "religion" come from? Whose interests are served by this apparently modern, European, and Christian way of categorizing practices? One way to think about the effect of the reflexive turn is to think of the conceptual vocabulary in religious studies as a window or lens through which scholars had previously been examining the world. What had been taken as natural and transparent now becomes itself the object of study. Richard King calls this "the Copernican turn," that is, as he nicely puts it, a turn to focus on the representation that makes the object possible rather than the object that makes the representation possible. The goal of this turn is to "denaturalize" the concept of religion (King, 1). The reflexive or Copernican turn, in my judgment, is a crucial aspect of social inquiry that scholars of religion should not ignore. But it clearly leads to the question: once one denaturalizes the concept of "religion," what does the academic study of religion study?

One answer is that the study of religion should shift to study the discursive practices and the material interests that led to the rhetorical manufacture of its central category. Scholars should shift from the study of religion to the study of "religion" and examine this particular conceptual lens, who created it, and why. A different answer is that even after making this turn, the academic study of religion can study the religious discourses, practices, communities, and institutions of different cultures around the world. These religious phenomena might be illuminated

* Richard King, ed., *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 664 pp., $180 hb; $60 pb or e-book. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 672 pp., $150 hb. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

HTR 111:3 (2018) 451–458

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or distorted by one's categories, but they exist "out there" in the world in the sense that they would be operating even if one were not studying them. This second answer treats religions as social realities in human history. Daniel Boyarin calls these answers "two almost directly opposed stances to the category 'religion'" (King, 23). If one wants a map of what the multi-disciplinary field of religious studies looks like from each perspective, the encyclopedic volume, *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies,* edited by Richard King, takes the first tack; the encyclopedic volume, *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion,* edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, takes the second.

Several of the chapters in Richard King's book not only reflect critically on the concept of "religion" but also reject the idea that the concept refers to anything real. Consider these two. Daniel Boyarin (King, ch. 2) argues for a nominalist view of the concept. He proposes that "religion" —and, similarly, *a* religion, such as "Judaism" or "Hinduism"—"only exists for those humans for which it is named" (25). If one describes other people as having a religion but they have not named it for themselves, then it exists for those who invent and use the name, but not for those so described. Until it has been conceptualized, a religion is not a reality "in the world"; it is "not in any possible way a 'real' object, an object that is historical or ontological, before the term comes to be used" (25). Boyarin has heard the realist rejoinder that it must be just as legitimate to speak of a "religion" as a social structure operating even in cultures that did not know the term as it is to say that there were economies in cultures that did not have the concept of an economy. But he is consistent in his nominalism and argues that, like religions, economies also did not exist in those cultures (25–6).[1]

Similarly, Timothy Fitzgerald (King, ch. 40) says that religions are not "observable entities" and they do not exist "in the world" (438, 440). Although presumably no one has thought that religions are "objects" in the sense of empirical things that could be held in the hand, it is clear that this negative claim is meant to debunk what Fitzgerald calls "the ideology of religious studies." Fitzgerald argues that religions are instead "collective imaginary constructions." If religions were collective imaginary constructions made by people in different cultures in different times in human history, then they would be analogous to political systems, they would exist in the world, and the term absolutely would have analytic value. This is how the term "religion" is taken by realists. But these are the claims that Fitzgerald explicitly rejects. So it seems that he means that religions are the collective imaginary constructions of modern western people. They do not really exist in the cultures that lack the term. They are not simply "imagined" (like, say, national

[1] Daniel Dubuisson (King, 269) also asserts that the "nominalist stance . . . would appear to be indisputable."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

borders) but rather "imaginary" in that these collective constructions correspond to nothing. They are fictions, and they are not even useful fictions (440–42).[2]

If one thinks that "religion" corresponds to a social reality, then one might expect that a volume that surveys the study of religion would include chapters on the different aspects of that social reality or the different forms it can take. In its shift of focus from religion to "religion," *Religion, Theory, Critique* eschews such chapters. Instead, the value of the book is its focus on how the concept of "religion" has been framed. Much of it concentrates on how particular thinkers have treated the concept, with chapters on Hegel, Max Müller, Hume, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, the New Atheists, James, Otto, Jung, Geertz/Asad, Eliade, Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, DuBois/Cox/Fanon, and Smith/Marx/Weber. And much of the book focuses on how the concept is treated in different academic disciplines, including chapters on psychology of religion, cognitive science of religion, biblical studies, comparative theology, philosophy of religion, structuralism, sociology, social theory, anthropology, cultural studies, ritual theory, religious studies in Japan, religious studies in South Africa, phenomenology, post-Marxism, continental philosophy, feminism, queer theory, and Black cultural criticism. Not every chapter explicitly focuses on the social construction of the concept; there are chapters, for example, on religion and coloniality and religion and globalization. But the dominant theme and original contribution concerns how the concept has been developed and deployed.

Can scholars both critique the concept and use it? Like Fitzgerald, William Arnal is a critic who argues that "religion" "is an analytically incoherent concept" (King, ch. 39). And Naomi Goldenberg is a critic who subtitles her paper "Are We Starting to Think Yet?," signaling, I take it, that scholars who have not taken the reflexive turn are not even thinking yet (King, ch. 48). But some of the authors who critique "religion" recognize that it is problematic without coming up with an alternative way of thinking, and then they fail to resist the concept's pull. For example, for the first half of his chapter, Edward Antonio (King, ch. 14) argues that the term "religion" was imposed on African ways of life, and he rejects the insistence that African traditions should be comprehended though the category of "religion." For the second half, however, he shifts to "ways in which African traditions can contribute positively, creatively, and productively to theorizing religion" (150). In cases like this, critical reflection on "religion" leads not to the rejection of the concept for which Boyarin, Fitzgerald, and others argue but rather to a perceived need to revise and, in fact, expand it. In this way, when a reflexive scholar operates with a realist social ontology according to which "religion" identifies a form of life that has a structure and causal powers even when that form of life does not

[2] Fitzgerald's chapter also includes what I judge to be the weakest critique of the concept of "religion," namely, the argument that the concept is incoherent, since, if one were to re-classify the "non-religious" as religious (as he recommends), then one could see that the concept is analytically useless: "By reclassifying as 'religious' our faith in capital and it's ritual management by state and city functionaries, we have trouble locating the imagined domain of the nonreligious secular at all . . . [and] the term religion becomes so all inclusive as to fade into useless abstraction" (King, 436).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have a name, then the concept of "religion" can get improved and strengthened. One might think of the methodological situation this way: one can seek to make the concept of "religion" less *distorting* only when one holds that religious forms of life really have existed in human history.

Stausberg and Engler are aware of the critique of the concept and in the opening chapter of their book, on definitions of "religion," Stausberg and Mark Gardiner decline to take a position on the realist/anti-realist question (Stausberg/Engler, 11). However, the organization of the book as a whole treats religion as a social reality that can be described (to use their subtitles) in different "Modes," such as communication, materiality, narrative, performance, sound, space, and time (ch. 17–23). This social reality is interwoven with other aspects of its "Environment," such as the economy, law, media, medicine, nature, politics, science, sports, and tourism (ch. 24–32). There are "Topics" with which it is often concerned such as belief, emotion, experience, gift and sacrifice, gods, initiations and transitions, priests and prophets and sorcerers, purity, and salvation (ch. 33–41). The social reality undergoes certain "Processes," such as differentiation, disintegration and death, expansion, globalization, individualization and privatization, tradition and innovation, objectification and commodification, and syncretism and hybridization (ch. 44–9). In all these ways, the volume treats religion not as a projection of contemporary scholars with no referent outside the scholars' study but rather as a multi-faceted social reality that can have multiple effects on other aspects of a given culture. The section of the book on "Theoretical Approaches," with chapters on cognitive science, economics, evolutionary theory, feminism and gender theory, hermeneutics, Marxism, postcolonialism, semantics, semiotics, (post)structuralism, and social theory, is the one that most resembles King's focus on representation-rather-than-object. But even here, the primary focus of each chapter is on inquiry into religions and not on how each approach constructs its object.

The chapter on "Historicizing and Translating Religion" by Giovanni Casadio provides the most explicit and sustained defense of realism in the book (Stausberg/Engler, ch. 2). Drawing on the work of historians and sociologists (especially Peter Beyer and Martin Riesebrodt), Casadio provides multiple cases in which pre-modern and non-Christian cultures recognized "revering the gods" as a distinguishable kind of activity that could take various forms, forms that competed with each other, that could be compared with each other, and about which one could generalize. Casadio therefore defends the concept of "religion" as an analytic taxon on the grounds that religions were "already there and shaped each other for centuries or even millennia before modern Western Christian-centric discourse supposedly invented [them]" (37).[3] I am sympathetic to the case he makes, though, to be fair, in some

[3] Given the insightful discussion by Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler in their chapter on "Semantics" (Stausberg/Engler, ch. 13), it is important to clarify that Casadio does not argue for (and this review essay does not argue for) a representationalist semantics according to which the word "religion" is meaningful only because it represents or names something real. Given an interpretationist semantics, which I endorse, a word can be meaningful whether or not it corresponds to some real

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

respects Casadio and the critics of "religion" talk past each other. For example, when Casadio insists that the academic study of religion must always historicize (34–5), he means that the social structures one studies must always be grasped in their historical and therefore differing and evolving contexts. But when the critics say "always historicize," they mean that the category of "religion" itself is not stable but shifts according to historically varied interests. And when Casadio says that translation from one culture to another is possible and Arvind Mandair says that it is impossible (King, ch. 17), Casadio is treating language-use as a tool and Mandair is treating it as an exercise of power. More will need to be said in order to sort out what scholars should do if language-use is both.

These two books do not represent two tribes in the academic study of religion, one exclusively focused on reflexivity and the other on realism. Both books examine the character of ritual and globalization and economics, and there are some authors in common. Nevertheless, the contrast between the paths indicated by these "two almost directly opposed stances to the category 'religion'" can seem stark, especially when, for example, Stausberg and Engler hope that their "*Handbook* sharpens the profile of the study of religion\s as a discipline" (4) and Fitzgerald rejects the very idea of "religions" in the plural (King, 437, 438). King hopes that even as his volume foregrounds the Copernican turn, it "does not create an impasse that prevents the possibility of a self-critical and nuanced comparativism to take place" (1). He is right that this is the crucial question: does denaturalizing the concept of "religion" undermine the study of religion as a social reality? Can one turn reflexively to examine one's conceptual lens and also look through it? King is also right that the Copernican turn need not have this effect. A scholar can be both reflexive and a realist. But if the aim of denaturalizing "religion" is not simply to demonstrate that the category is a tissue of colonialist nonsense that refers to nothing, then one cannot only put the category of "religion" in question. Scholars of religion whose work is informed by the reflexive turn must not only uncover the "hidden" and "dark" motives (King, 1) that led to the emergence of this academic field, but also provide an account of the social and historical structures that are *successfully* grasped by it.

As noted above, the critics of "religion" make much of the fact that the concept emerged at a certain time and place and was then imposed on cultures in other locales and periods. But a case for a realist social ontology that takes seriously the Copernican turn can be made this way. Imagine an insular group of people—perhaps in a remote village or on an island. In this thought experiment, what contemporary scholars might call the "culture" of these people and what they might call the "religion" are coextensive. One might say that the villagers' religion is

object, and so the word "religion" can be meaningful whether or not there are forms of life in the world that the use of the word helps us grasp. The point of the realist argument, rather, is ontological: namely, that the fact that the presence or absence of the word "religion" in a given community has no bearing on whether there is or isn't a form of life "out there" in the world. Such a form of life can be present in a community that lacks the word, and it may be absent in a community that has it. I thank Mark Q. Gardiner for helpful discussions on this point.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"embedded in" or "permeates" their culture, though, as Brent Nongbri has pointed out, these verbs would be misleading if they imply that two different things have been mixed.[4] Rather, what contemporary scholars would label the villagers' culture and their religion is simply homogeneous. The prayers, offerings, feasting and fasting, pilgrimages, or other practices they do that involve belief in the gods are not performed by a bounded community, nor in a specific kind of building, nor on a specific day of the week. These practices instead permeate the community's work activities, their political rituals, their art, and their family life. It is easy to imagine that a group of people like this would not have a distinct word for their "religion."

But imagine that villagers with a different way of life (perhaps a different language or a different structure to their families) come to live among them and take on the gods of the village. Or imagine that the villagers travel to another village where the language and the family structure is roughly the same, but the gods are different. Under either of these conditions, the villagers might see a value in making a distinction between "culture" and "religion." Precisely this is what Boyarin says happened in late antiquity. He quotes the fourth-century Christian archbishop Gregory Nazianzen's argument that one can be part of Greek culture (*ethnos*) without participating in Greek religion (*thrēskeia*). And, conversely, those who come from different cultures may begin to practice the same religion. Gregory seeks to make an analytic distinction between two aspects of a previously homogeneous life: "Simply because two realities encounter each other does not mean that they are confluent, i.e., identical" (quoted in King, 30).[5]

Similarly, the arrival in China of immigrants from India who followed teachings of the Buddha led to the development, first, of the term *jiao* ("doctrine" or "tradition"), which took Confucianism as the prototype and was used to sort the *sanjiao* or "three doctrines" of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism and then, more recently, "after much epistemological groping" (King, 157) of the term *zongjiao* that also includes Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Protestant and Catholic Christianities. In both of these examples, the emergence of a concept for a previously undifferentiated aspect of one's culture occurs, as one might expect, only in a context of difference and competition (Stausberg/Engler, 36). But in neither of these examples is the discourse of religion simply imposed on cultures by the power of colonizers or imperialists. Rather, there is a complex process of cultural translation and appropriation of a concept that is useful in evolving ways to those who use it to describe others and those who use it to describe themselves.

[4] Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[5] Boyarin develops this history of the emergence of the concept of religion in late antiquity in Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), though I would argue that the historical work in that book should have led the authors not to the anti-realist title *Imagine No Religion* but rather to a realist title like *Distinguishing Religion*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Looking at the historical transition from not-making a distinction to making one, Boyarin draws the nominalist conclusion that religion doesn't exist for a group of people until they have the concept. If the academic study of religion is only the study of how people understand themselves, then that nominalist conclusion would be right. But if the academic study of religion is the study of social structures of which insiders may be unaware—that is, not simply a report of insider's views but what J. Z. Smith called a second-order study—then one can draw the realist conclusion that religions are aspects of their culture that can shape people's lives, even when those so shaped have not named them.[6] This realist stance towards the concept of "religion" makes the study of religion analogous to the study of economics or politics or art. The conceptual vocabulary one uses, that is, will inevitably have a particular provenance and the selection of one vocabulary over others will never be neutral nor free of material interests, but that vocabulary can still legitimately be used to understand, explain, and evaluate social practices in the world.

In the end, the decision whether the word "religion" is solely an imaginary construction created by modern scholars or whether it also names a social reality that existed in history is not a choice that scholars have to make arbitrarily. It turns, rather, on a philosophical question about ontology. What does it mean to say that a "social structure" or a "form of life" is something real? According to an ontology of social facts, statements about social structures or forms of life purport to describe the collective agreement of some group of people. On this account, statements like "One fasts during Ramadan" or "Jude is the patron saint of lost causes" are unlike statements that "Sulfuric acid is H_2SO_4" or that "Red dwarfs are the most common type of star in the Milky Way" because the latter would be true even if there were no human beings. But they are like the statements that "A year has twelve months" or that "Austria borders Italy," because they are true if they accurately describe collective agreements. These collective agreements depend for their existence and maintenance on human discourse, but (except in weird cases) they do not depend on the discourse of the scholars who study them.[7] For this reason, if one defines "religion" as something like *a set of practices predicated on a belief in superempirical realities*, then statements like "Religion existed in ancient Egypt" can be true. To be sure, the word "religion," like all words, is the product of a certain time and place. But the fact that there were practices predicated on belief in superempirical realities in what we now call ancient Egypt is not the invention of scholars. The concept is therefore coherent and analytically useful.

[6] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) xi; idem, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 179. I discuss the realist and the anti-realist elements in Smith's work in Kevin Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion," *Religion* 47:2 (March, 2017) 161–78.

[7] It is also worth keeping in mind that when a practice in which one participates is named, or when one names it, it can be changed by being labelled. There is "an epistemological shift" (King, 155) when one names "religion," just as there is, for instance, when two people who have been socializing with each other name themselves a couple.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If a social ontology like this is right, then "religion" can name a social reality that existed in history. This fact justifies the focus one sees in Stausberg/Engler. But this fact does not undo the theological or imperialist genealogy of the term. It also does not clarify the shifting ways that this term has been understood. These problems with the central category of the academic study of religion justify the focus one sees in King. Nevertheless, if a social ontology like this is right, then one can be both reflexive and a realist, a scholar of both religion and "religion."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000196 Published online by Cambridge University Press