Opportunity, Challenge and a Definition of Religion

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Abstract

In assembling an array of disciplines to study religion, nature and culture, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture presents an opportunity for progress through cross-fertilization and synthesis. In so doing, the Society also challenges us to communicate with each other despite our differing assumptions. Such communication requires, first, that we explicitly define our terms, not least the three terms central to the society's name. Ideally, our definitions will be at once substantive, applicable cross-culturally, and explicitly embedded in theory. Fortunately, current scholarship makes such definitions appear possible. In the case of the term religion, for example, cognitive science supports defining it, broadly yet substantively, as a system of thought and action for interpreting and influencing the world, built on anthropomorphic premises. Anthropomorphism, in turn, may be theorized as the inevitable consequence of a strategy of perception for an ambiguous world: namely, guess first at what matters most. Similarly broad, substantive definitions appear possible for nature and culture as well.

Both the opportunity and the challenge of the ISSRNC stem largely from the breadth of our enterprise. We represent diverse disciplines, assembled to consider the relations among three important and general terms—nature, culture, religion—each of which is contested. Our opportunity is to achieve vigor through cross-fertilization, and our challenge is not to talk past each other.

The challenge is especially sharp because each of the three terms in question, though deceptively familiar, is controversial. Despite knowing of the controversies, we assume that the meanings of these terms are clearer than they really are. Hence if we do not address terminology early and often, then the very outlines of our enterprise will remain unclear. While explicit consideration of our terms may not produce agreement on

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how best to use them, it will produce greater clarity about what we individually intend.

Thus we each have definitional work to do, accompanied of course by theoretical work. In doing it, we should heed von Stuckrad's (2006) admonition that 'nature' is a concept, not a thing. Indeed, we should extend that admonition to 'culture' and 'religion' as well. Our definitions, that is, should be nominal, not real ones: they should clarify how we mean to use our terms, not what 'really exists'. This is because whatever it is that really exists has no intrinsic boundaries, and because disputes in which each party assumes different boundaries are potentially endless.

At the same time, our definitions can be substantive. Even nominal definitions are useful to the extent that they group actual phenomena—e.g., sights, sounds, and human thoughts or actions—in some persistent and meaningful way. 'Religion', for example, may be used to corral a particular family of human ideas and actions. One such family appears cross-culturally, though it is, like other families (Wittgenstein 1974), not bounded but open-ended. Specifically, the family I have in mind is one of ideas and actions relating to (among other things) important, often-invisible, human-like agents—'spirits', for example—who have interests in and influence on human affairs, and with whom humans can interact symbolically (as by prayer and offerings).

Many other uses of the term religion, of course, also are defensible since, as noted, religion is better considered a concept than a thing. Still, the description of the concept I have offered puts together ideas and behaviors that are particularly widespread, persistently associated, and somehow important. Before considering my suggestion about religion in more detail, however, permit me a few general questions and observations regarding our two other key terms, nature and culture. (I single out religion both because it seems crucial here and because I have written on it at length: Guthrie 1980, 1988, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

First, regarding 'nature': to what does it stand in contrast? For most of us, it contrasts most clearly with 'culture' and with the ostensible creators of culture, humans. But at the same time, many of us, especially in a post-Darwinian world, would say that humans—and therefore culture—also are part of nature. And especially now that wild chimpanzees (Whiten *et al.* 1999) and arguably other species (Bekoff 2006)—surely part of nature—have been shown to have culture, the nature-culture opposition is both complex and dubious.

Behind this already-paradoxical contrast of nature with culture may be an older, religious contrast of the natural with the 'supernatural'. The

supernatural, defined for example as what is beyond or above nature or natural law, often is proposed (Lohmann 2003) as a distinguishing feature of religion. It connotes mystery, irregularity, and unpredictability. In contrast to it, nature is regular and lawful. In Abrahamic traditions, God is supernatural and, to the extent that humans are made in the image of God, especially in having a soul, so are they.

The concept of the supernatural, however, has its own problems. Most important for our project, it has been criticized as a culture-bound, Western idea (Klass 1995; Jindra 2003). The term exists in Japanese, for example, only as an obscure translation that, in an informal poll (done during my fieldwork in Japan), most Japanese took to mean 'very natural'. Whether we oppose it to culture or to the supernatural, then, 'nature' now is ambiguous, even as a Western category, because it lacks any clearly contrasting term.

The notion of 'culture' is at least equally contested, even within anthropology, with which it is so closely identified. Indeed the term has been debated almost from the beginning of anthropology and has received hundreds of definitions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 2001). To mention just two persistent, contrasting possibilities, we may think of culture alternatively as a replication of uniformity in individual thought and action, or as an organization of diversity (Wallace 1970, in Schneider and Schneider 2005). These alternatives are directly opposed. The former implies that a culture is coherent, homogeneous, bounded, and singular, and the latter that it is centrifugal, heterogeneous, open-ended, and plural. The uncertainties raised by the term are so many and so enduring that some anthropologists want to abandon it. Abandonment would, I think, be a loss, but certainly definitional issues persist.

'Religion' at first blush may seem more definite than nature or culture but, of course, is at least equally controversial. To begin with, it is, as varied writers have noted, again a Western term, namely for a concept derived from Abrahamic traditions (Saler 1999 [1993]) and their particular constellation of features. Most non-Western languages have no equivalent term. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that the peoples using those languages have no religion. It does mean that since what they have is neither the same as Western religion nor denoted by an equivalent word, the task of definition is even more pressing. Naturally, it means also that the question of whether or not a given action or idea is religious is alien and without meaning to such peoples. At best, with a translation by neologism, such a question can be only approximated.

The Japanese language, for example, now has a translation of 'religion', created in response to influences from the West; but it exhibits a considerable shift in meaning. The term is *shūkyō*, literally 'sectarian

teachings'. The result surprises Westerners: Japanese regard Buddhism, with its sects, as a religion but do not so regard Shinto—despite its priests, shrines, festivals, prayers, offerings, and deities—because it ostensibly is uniform.

Even within the West and within individual disciplines, almost the only agreement on religion is that there is no agreement. For example, should we define it as having to do with the supernatural, with the sacred, with the spiritual, or with God or gods? These are not equivalent, and each possibility has problems (Saler 1999 [1993]).

Definitions depending on the notion of the supernatural, as noted, have the disadvantage of being culture bound. Thus they are difficult to apply to the many non-Western societies in which the supernatural is not recognized as a category. Further, if the supernatural is defined objectively ('etically', in anthropological jargon), as a category of concepts concerning mysterious, unpredictable, or immaterial forces and agents, then many Western lay conceptions of such phenomena as nuclear explosions, wave/particle physics, and viral infections would qualify (Horton 1993); yet we would not want to call these conceptions religious.

Similarly, definitions of religion depending on the 'sacred', though popular for decades in the West, are both culture bound and ambiguous. As a number of anthropologists noted when Durkheim (2001 [1915]) first advanced the sacred as central to religion, many cultures lack such a concept (Lukes 1972, Guthrie 1996a). Moreover, the concept is (and historically has long been) vague, ambiguous, and overly inclusive (Preus 1987, Lutzky 1993). If the sacred is defined, for example, as whatever is of ultimate importance to a society or individual, then since presumably everyone holds *something* most important, everyone by definition must be religious. But if everyone is religious in this sense, the term religion has little distinctive meaning.

Definitions that relate religion to 'spirituality' (as well as uses of the term spirituality in preference to the term religion) once again suffer from ambiguity. Indeed, ambiguity may be the very attraction of 'spirituality'. Just over two hundred years ago, Schleiermacher (1988) declared that an internal experience, rather than a doctrine or a practice, is central to religion. If so, then the differences among the world's religions are merely apparent, not real, and no essential contradictions separate them. Rather, all adherents share the same essential experience. Demonstrating this sameness is, however, precluded by its interiority.

Since Schleiermacher's time, subjectivity and an emphasis on a private relationship with the object of devotion increasingly have characterized popular Western religion. This subjectivity and this private relationship widely are perceived as more profound and subtle than particular

religious doctrines and practices. Thus a 'general essence of religion… less tangible and more universal than any particular religion [and] nowadays often referred to as spirituality' is seen as liberated from the confines of institutional religion (Masuzawa 1998: 71). What the spiritual experience *is*, however, and whether it is the same for everyone, remains obscure.

Since the religious or spiritual experience is by definition subjective and private, this obscurity appears inevitable. One might plausibly infer that to be 'spiritual' is to be, to be inclined to be, or to be interested in beings that are disembodied or immaterial and hence freed from the limitations of the body. If so, spirituality is an important cross-cultural feature of most religiosity.

A less exalted possibility may be what some 'Americans mean by spirituality…simply an immense openness to occult superstitions' (Gopnik 2005: 86). In any case, the intrinsic privacy of spiritual experience impedes scholarly inquiry, which depends upon communication and hence on shared understandings. Once more, the way forward requires at least a definition of a term.

Finally, definitions of religion that depend on notions of a single God, of course, work only for religions that have such a god, and even definitions depending on plural gods may mislead if applied to societies in which ancestors are the main objects of prayer and offering. (Buddhism often is alleged, as by Durkheim 2001 [1915], to be a religion without a god or gods; but this is a misapprehension based on atypically philosophical strains of Buddhism. Virtually all popular forms have gods, spirits, or both.)

Although definitions depending on notions of gods may be problematic, they still are closest to what I propose. Such definitions have the virtue of being both commonsensical in the West and, with some modification, broadly applicable elsewhere. The modification is that we must acknowledge that while the Western, Abrahamic tradition emphasizes difference between God and humans, other traditions may make gods virtually continuous with humans. In Japanese popular religion as in most other 'ancestor worship', for example, the principal objects, the ancestors, *are* humans, albeit now disembodied. Equally important, even Abrahamic conceptions are ineluctably anthropomorphic. If all human-like qualities are removed from conceptions of God, most theologians ruefully admit, nothing meaningful remains.

The observation that gods are humanlike leads directly to a substantive definition of religion, namely as a system of thought and action for interpreting and influencing the world, built on anthropomorphic premises (Guthrie Forthcoming, a). That religion anthropomorphizes is an old

observation, dating at least to Xenophanes (ca. 600 BCE). The more radical claim that it *is* anthropomorphism also has a long pedigree, from Spinoza (1955) and Hume (1957 [1757]) to Feuerbach (1957 [1873]), Freud (1964 [1927]), Tylor (1873), and Horton (1993). Despite these writers, however, definitions of religion as anthropomorphism have not generally prevailed, even among secular scholars of religion.

That these definitions have failed to persuade a wider audience probably owes much to the lack of an adequate account of anthropomorphism itself, still widely regarded as a trivial if persistent idiosyncrasy of human thought. Most earlier writers have concentrated on anthropomorphism in religion, not in general, and almost all have explained it by either or both of two theories. These may be called the familiarity and comfort theories (Guthrie 1993). The familiarity theory is that we find much of the external world mysterious and puzzling, and seek to understand it on the model most familiar to us, namely ourselves and other humans. This theory, however, fails to explain why we should anthropomorphize phenomena with which we are as familiar as we are with ourselves, from house plants to stuck drawers. The comfort theory is that we find the nonhuman world frightening and seek to tame it by peopling it. This fails because much anthropomorphism, like many people, is itself frightening.

My own account of anthropomorphism differs in two ways. First, I note (with Spinoza [1955], Nietzsche [1966] and a few others) that, far from a minor idiosyncrasy, it is diverse and pervasive in human thought and action. More important, I propose a cognitive explanation of anthropomorphism that may be called the better-safe-than-sorry theory (Guthrie 1980, 1993, 1997b, 2002, Forthcoming a). That is, in a perceptual world that is chronically ambiguous, and in which both humans and other animals often conceal their presence, our innate perceptual strategy is to guess first at what matters most.

What matters most is what is alive and especially what is human or humanlike. Hence we are wired to scan constantly for signs of life and humanity, and to judge readily that we have found them. If we are right, we gain much, and if we are wrong (which happens frequently), we lose little. If we hear our house door slam and the cause was a human as we first imagine, we can take appropriate action; and if the actual cause was wind, we have lost only a heartbeat or two. Thus anthropomorphism—a retrospective category of mistaken but now corrected judgments that a human or a human feature was present—stems from the same principle known in philosophy of religion as Pascal's Wager: roughly, better safe than sorry. It is an inevitable consequence of our perceptual predicament and of an evolved strategy with which we meet it.

Armed with this account of anthropomorphism, I suggest, we are able to explain both the innumerable personifying illusions of daily life and the plethora of human-like beings elaborated by culture, from Chiquita Banana to Jack Frost to Thor to Yahweh, with which we interpret our world. Some writers (e.g. Pyysiänen 2002: 121-22) object to my account as an explanation of gods and spirits, largely on the ground that these beings, unlike humans, often are invisible. Invisibility in agents, they believe, is counter-intuitive and calls for some special explanation. But such invisibility really is not so special, for two reasons. First, many humans, like many animals in their natural environments, may be practically invisible by virtue of camouflage or by operating behind the scenes (Guthrie 1993; Burkert 1996; Pyysiänen acknowledges this, but finds it insufficient).

More important, recent cognitive-science work in several disciplines indicates that humans conceptualize other humans primarily in terms of their minds, not their bodies (Hassin, Uleman and Bargh 2005), and that we are 'natural-born dualists' (Bloom 2004: xiii) who innately conceive minds as immaterial and as independent of bodies (Leder 1990; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Bering 2002; Kelemen 2004: 7-8). Human agency, that is, is conceived as essentially disembodied. If so, then conceptions of invisible gods and spirits may be among our most elemental conceptions of human beings.

Our tendency to humanize the non-human ranges from hearing doors closed by the wind as intruders, to finding messages in plagues, to sensing spirits in ocean waves and intelligent design in nature (Guthrie 2006). Within the endless array of things and events perceived and treated as human-like, no clear boundary distinguishes the secular and the religious. Nor could such a boundary exist, even as a cultural precept, except in the West where the concept of religion as a separable entity is at home. Instead, we as scholars must judge to what degree given thoughts and actions belong to the open-ended family of phenomena we call religion.

Such judgments will rely in large part on the degree of systematization and significance the thoughts and actions display. Anthropomorphism necessarily occurs throughout human endeavor, including domains such as political economy (as in Adam Smith's 'invisible hand') and even science (as in Darwin's description of nature as carefully improving her progeny). In these realms, however, it is idiosyncratic and unsystematized. Indeed, in science it is abjured, even though not avoided altogether. Only in religion—where most theologians admit it is unavoidable—is it elaborate, systematic, and foundational.

Problems of definition are also problems of theory. Although we are building our new society on a foundation of terms—nature, culture,

religion—with origins in Western culture, we can and must define these terms to work elsewhere as well. Such definitions need correspondingly broad theoretical bases, and the above example of religion suggests that we can build such bases. We can do so because, despite cultural diversity, people everywhere are disposed to interpret and act upon the world in broadly similar ways, according to similar needs and interests.

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