SOCIOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS, LANGUAGE GAMES AND THE 'ESSENCE' OF RELIGION[i]

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No light will ever be cast in the sybillic twilight that, for us, surrounds the origin and nature of religion as long as we insist on approaching it as a single problem requiring only a single word for its solution. Thus far no one has been able to offer a definition of religion that is <u>both precise and sufficiently comprehensive</u>. No one has been able to grasp its ultimate <u>essence</u>… (Simmel [1897] 1997:101 <u>emphasis added</u>).

Although Georg Simmel hoped to settle the definition of religion question when he penned these lines, the debate was just getting started in the new discipline of sociology. Despite the inadequacy of his own solution to the problem, Simmel identified the axes on which the debate would turn for the next hundred years. It has continually revolved around the search for a definition that is "both precise and sufficiently comprehensive"(101), that is, for a definition that is neither too broad nor too narrow. In this paper, I will show that these arguments point to a hidden consensus in the debate. Second, Simmel pointed out that nobody has been able to grasp the "essence" of religion. Nobody has since, and I will suggest that this is because there is no essence of religion outside the discourse of religion. This does not mean, however, that we cannot conceptualize or define "religion" sociologically.

The literature on the proper definition/conception of religion is enormous, and no single discussion can adequately address all of the issues as they appear in a single discipline, let alone all of them[ii]. I have chosen to deal with the definition debate in sociology for two reasons. First, these debates are useful because they occur within a tradition of scholarship that is explicitly non-theological, and thus do not presuppose an ontology "behind" religion, as in most of the phenomenological or "sui generis" conceptions of religion that are dominant in the academic study of religion (cf. McCutcheon 1997,

Fitzgerald 2000, Wiebe 1999). Second, I am examining these debates because I think they point to an implicit consensus that is useful for a non-essentialist definition of religion.

After providing an overview of the sociological debate, I will historicize the concept of religion, drawing on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (in)famous book <u>The Meaning and End of Religion</u> (1978). I will suggest that once we have properly historicized the concept "religion", there is much to be gained from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophical writings (1968, 1980) in constructing a useful, non-essentialist and sociological definition of "religion". A number of scholars in cognate disciplines (Peter Byrne, Jonathan Z. Smith, Timothy Fitzgerald and Benson Saler) have recently made significant contributions to non-essentialist conceptions/definitions of religion, some of them directly influenced by Wittgenstein. I will use Wittgenstein's texts to work through what is more adequate and less adequate in their approaches to the topic.

The Definitional Debate in Sociology of Religion

In <u>The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life</u> (1915), Durkheim proposes what has since become a very influential functional definition of religion in response to early substantive definitions that he argues are all too narrow and ethnocentric. In short, the substantive definitions exclude too many religions. For example, E.B. Tylor's definition of religion as "belief in spirits" excludes the religion of the Jains, and even more importantly, some traditions of Buddhism, which admit of no gods or spirits. Although Durkheim's assumption about the non-theism of Buddhism has been questioned, he anticipates this challenge. He argues that even if there were divine beings in Buddhism (such as the Buddha has sometimes become), this is a marginal rather than an essential element, "since the practice of the four

spiritual truths would be possible, even if the memory of him who revealed them were completely obliterated"   (1915: 47).   He suggests that "belief in spirits" is an implicitly Christian understanding of religion, since Christianity "is inconceivable without the ever-present idea of Christ and his ever-practiced cult" (47).

Durkheim therefore defines religion as:

...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 into one single moral community called a Church all who adhere to them (1915:62).

The force of this definition, and the rest of the book, is to argue that religion is the cohesive force that unites the members of a society in the worship of sacred symbols. As Roger O'Toole notes, Durkheim also incorporates a significant substantive element in his definition, since he defines religion as "beliefs and practices <u>relative to sacred things</u>". However, in his emphasis on sacred things as symbols that represent the community, the substantive element of his definition serves to reinforce the functional (1984:13).

If Durkheim proposed his functionalist definition of religion because the substantive definitions are too narrow, his functional definition, and that of his disciples, is too broad. If "religion is as religion does", then we cannot say that there is or ever has been a society with no "religion" (Spiro 1966:86). This commits us to the position that religion is found in every culture, even before we begin comparative analyses. Secondly, and even more important, as Melford Spiro argues, functionalist definitions of religion make it "virtually impossible to set any substantive boundary to religion and, thus, to distinguish it from other socio-cultural phenomena" (1966:89). Thus, for example, the question of secularization becomes virtually invisible, and we have difficulty distinguishing state apparatuses and the economy from "religion"[iii].

Ultimately it was probably the collapse of structural functionalist theory that made the functional definitions seem less plausible. Since the late 1960s, models of society that emphasize equilibrium, gradual evolution and reasonably harmonious integration, no longer seem adequate. In response to the crisis of functionalist theory, and its definitions of religion, substantive definitions enjoyed a remarkable comeback after a long period of disrepute (O'Toole 1984:27). Although there may be a broad consensus that substantive definitions are preferable, this has by no means led to agreement about what that substantive element should be.

Convinced neither by functionalist theory, nor by the substantive content of Durkheim's definition, several anthropologists began to re-value Tylor's "belief in spiritual beings" definition (O'Toole 1984:27ff). Critics took issue with Durkheim's insistence on the sacred/profane distinction, since in many cultures such distinctions do not exist (Worsley 1968). Thus, if functional definitions are no longer plausible, and the sacred is a Western religious notion, then there is an obvious need to find an alternative way of defining religion.

While agreeing with Durkheim that "belief in spiritual beings" is a Western conception of religion, anthropologists such as Robin Horton and Melford Spiro have argued that Tylor's definition of religion was nonetheless close to the mark (O'Toole 1984:27-36). Spiro agrees with Durkheim that there are many problems with using the notion of "spirit" as the essence of religion. Many societies think of "spirits" in a way that we would not recognize as such, or attribute to "natural" processes things that Westerners would associate with the belief in "spirits". The belief in spirits as the essence of religion is a Western, ethnocentric idea that ends up being super-imposed on a wide diversity of beliefs and cosmologies. Spiro argues, however, that "superhuman beings" are universal in all religions. This being the case, he defines religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned

interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro 1966:96). Spiro argued that Durkheim and other Western observers have noticed only the non-theistic nature of élite forms of Buddhism, but they are mistaken to suggest that there are no "gods" or "spirits" or "superhuman beings" in Theravada Buddhism.   The Buddha is a superhuman being in popular forms of the Theravada tradition, and he is not alone– many other superhuman beings also populate their cosmology.

     The matter of Buddhism is far from settled, however, as others have taken issue with Spiro's argument.   Malcolm Hamilton (1995:14-15, 71-79) argues that while Theravada Buddhism is a religion, the Buddha is not a "superhuman being" (although he may have been), since when he passed into enlightenment, he ceased to exist "as an independent ego". There are superhuman beings, or "spirits" in some expressions of Theravada Buddhism, but there are not in other communities of the same tradition– including many popular communities (Herbrechtsmeier 1993). As Herbrechtsmeier observes, Theravada is not the only Buddhist tradition which denies the existence of "gods", "spirits" and "superhuman beings". Others include the historically important Hinayana schools, and the contemporary Rinzai Zen tradition (1993).

     Evidently, belief in "super-human beings" is not essential for defining Buddhism, let alone religion in general.   Moreover, Hamilton observes, "super-human" is a very ambiguous concept. Who counts as a "super-human"? Many non-religious figures have been seen as "superhuman", and many religious objects, spirits, and symbols are not treated as being "above" humans or as "superhuman"– think, for example of the disrespect shown to the images of non-compliant saints in popular Catholicism (Hamilton 1995). According to Herbrechtsmeier, Spiro's notion of the "super-human" shows a profound misunderstanding of what "human" is in the samsara worldview of the Buddhists. In this belief system, the

ability to do "wondrous things" does not make a person anything more, or less than, human (1993).

Stark and Bainbridge (1996) have also followed the substantive tradition of Tylor in their 'rational-choice' models of religion. They make the "supernatural" the essence of religion. Religions are "systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions" (1996:39). The "supernatural" is then defined as "forces outside or beyond nature which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces" (39). There are obvious problems with this definition as well. Most serious is that they impose, in a distinctly heavy-handed manner, Western assumptions about the difference between "nature" (physical forces) and "super-nature". Peter Worsley addresses this kind of problem when he writes that the natives of Papua New Guinea, for example, do not make this distinction. They have "…no impermeable membrane between the 'mundane' and the 'magical', for the primitive is not a dualist, operating with a model of 'two worlds', nor a schizophrenic operating with different principles– empirical and mystical– in different situations" (1968:xxvii).

The dualistic assumptions of such definitions (nature v. super-nature, mundane v. transcendent) emerge from the world-view of Western– more specifically Christian– culture. As Roland Robertson observes:

> [a] great analytic difficulty in the sociology of religion is the extent to which our basic conceptual apparatus is derived from the doctrines of Christian religions...The ideas of religion and religiosity are products of basically Christian thinking because of the tensions expressed in Christian doctrine as between on the one hand, social and terrestrial reality, and on the other, transcendent spiritual reality (Robertson 1970:43).

Robertson, like many of his colleagues, has been dissatisfied with the narrow substantive definitions of religion, and has sought to provide one that is more inclusive and cross-cultural. He therefore defines religious culture as

> [t]hat set of beliefs and symbols (and values deriving directly therefrom) pertaining to a distinction between an empirical and a <u>super-empirical, transcendent reality</u>; the affairs of the empirical being subordinated in significance to the non-empirical (1970:47 <u>emphasis added</u>).

Robertson's use of the term "super-empirical", instead of "supernatural" is not much of an improvement, since it is unclear exactly what the term means. In physics, for example, both dark matter and sub-atomic particles are super-empirical theoretical constructs, at least insofar as neither may be <u>directly</u> observed. Belief in both, however, have significantly re-shaped the way in which physics looks at the empirical, so in that sense, the "empirical [is] subordinated in significance to the non-empirical" (1970:47). Therefore, if "super-empirical" is to mean anything at all, it probably means something like "transcendent". Robertson himself seems not entirely unaware of this problem, so he qualifies his notion of "super-empirical" by making this very clarification ("transcendent reality"). This qualification makes him guilty of the very charge that he brought against scholars who write a Christian concept of the "transcendent spiritual world" into a definition of religion which purports to be inclusive and cross-cultural.

Numerous other attempts have been made at defining religion in substantive terms. I think it is fair to say, however, that although many of them are useful, none are fully adequate, since they are all seen as either too narrow or too broad. Narrow definitions tend to exclude certain phenomena, such as <u>Theravada</u> Buddhism, that the participants by and large agree should be included. Others tend to include too much, and make it difficult to

decide where religion 'ends', or how to distinguish it from political ideologies, scientific systems, or Girl Guide troupes (Swanson 1960)– things which the participants in the debate would agree are not, properly speaking, "religions".

In light of these difficulties, it is easy to see why Weber, in a now famous statement, declined to define religion. He writes:

> 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 (1963:1).

Unfortunately, Weber never finished his study. He nonetheless worked with an implicit (denotative) conception of religion, as evidenced by the books and articles that he wrote on the topic (Buddhism, Ancient Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Puritan and Medieval Catholic Christianity). Thus, Roger O'Toole argues that Weber "incorporate[s] a fundamental methodological error by assuming implicitly what [he is] not prepared to express explicitly" (1984:15). However this implicit understanding of what "religion" is permeates, not just Weber's work, but the entire sociological debate on the definition of religion.

One of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, argued that definitional discourse is "peculiar", in a way that ordinary language is not. Critiquing his own early work on logic, he writes

> (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.5): "The general form of propositions is: This is how things are."— That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it (1968: I § 114).

Most of the definitional attempts to "define religion" do just this. They do not "trace the outline of the thing's nature", but trace "round the frame through which we look at it" (1968). But the question is, around which frame are we tracing? The sociological discussion that I have presented suggests that the debate traces around this denotative definition of religion. Indeed, it is only because of this implicit agreement that the debate can take place at all. All of the participants "know" what a religion is (Cargo Cults, Judaism, Theravada Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Bahai, etc.), they just cannot agree on a connotative definition that will adequately encompass all of the examples of religion that are presumed. This is especially true if we transpose complaints about ethnocentrism to complaints that particular definitions are too narrow. That is, ethnocentric definitions exclude, or do not adequately include, phenomena that we "know" are religions.

The Genealogy of "Religion"

Most of the sociological attempts to define religion have involved the search for the essence of religion, that necessary condition which enables us to distinguish between religion and not-religion. This is due, in part, to the failure to live up to the sociological injunction to "always historicize" (cf. Jameson 1981). In The Meaning and End of Religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith ([1962] 1978) historicizes religion by providing a genealogy of "religion" as a concept in the modern world, and in so doing casts doubt on the very prospects of finding such an essence. Despite, or perhaps because of, his particular theological agenda (cf. W.C. Smith 1981), Smith historicizes our conceptions, and demonstrates precisely why religion is so difficult to define[iv]. Cantwell Smith argues that "religion" is a modern and Western phenomenon- at least in its origins.

Most languages have historically had no word that corresponds with our concept "religion" and the equivalent terms in contemporary non-European languages have been imported from the West. Even in Europe, for most of its history, the word "religion" (religio) meant something very different than it does today[v].   Smith argues that in early Latin texts, religio had to do with specific cultic rites and piety, rather than a "name for a system of ideas and beliefs" (1978:40). With the partial exception of ante-Constantinian Christianity, this is the sense in which it is used even in the history of the West until it began to change in the seventeenth century.

Smith argues that even at the time of the Reformation, "religio" and its derivatives in the European vulgata still meant "piety" or "worship".   The idea that religion "names a system of ideas and beliefs" emerges for the first time in the Enlightenment (1978:40). In pamphlet after pamphlet, tract after tract, this new idea was driven home, either by polemicists or by apologists of particular traditions. At first, "religion" was something that someone else had, whereas the critic had "faith", "piety", or in the case of the Lumières, "rational thought". Slowly, however, people began to refer to their own faith as "religion", as they began to defend "true religion" (as a coherent system of beliefs and practices) against its critics.

The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the birth of two fundamentally new uses of the word "religion". First, was the use of the word "religions" (plural) to denote phenomena that were different, but somehow equivalent.   Missions, particularly Catholic missions, and the encounter with "other religions" in trade and exploration, led for the first time to the concept of the "World Religions" (see also Jonathan Z. Smith 1998). The second was the use of "religion" as a generic "essence". The philosophies of Kant and Feuerbach are particularly important here, both as examples of a general Zeitgeist and as important

influences on the discourse. Feuerbach is particularly important, since he was the first to argue that "religion" (in the generic sense) had a single essence, originally in The Essence of Christianity ([1854]1957) and several years later in The Essence of Religion ([1846] 1969). Religion thus became a single thing for which we may ask the question "What is it? ".

"Religion" as we know it emerged out of the encounter with "other" religions (pluralism) and in the struggles to free society from the power of the church (differentiation). So, while these are two of the major forces in the process of "secularization" (Berger 1967; Fenn 1978; Martin 1978), they are also major factors in the genesis of "religion". Ironically, secularization and "religion" are not at all opposites; rather religion emerges out of the forces of secularization!

Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that "religion" is a troublesome construction, one that divides people who identify with different "religions", and that it provides a problematic basis for comparative study in the academy. He therefore urges academic specialists to abandon the concept altogether. We should rather both study and practice expressions of "faith".

Although The Meaning and End of Religion (1978) has become something of a classic among comparative religionists, most academic students of religion do not seem convinced enough to abandon the term altogether. As I see it, his major contribution is to offer us a "genealogy of religion" (in a Foucauldian sense), which should make us wary of looking for an essence in the first place.   Smith's argument that "faith" should have priority over "religion", however, does not seem much of an improvement, and looks suspiciously like a kind of intellectual Protestant imperialism of all that we once called religion- sola fides! Finally, although it is easy to recognize that religion is a troublesome concept, it

remains the common means of identifying a range of beliefs and practices in the modern world – not just for academics, but also for people within and without "religion".

Non-Essentialist Conceptions of Religion: Wittgenstein's Language Games

What we need, then, is a non-essentialist way of defining, or conceptualizing "religion". A number of scholars have recently proposed using Wittgenstein's approach to language games as a means of conceptualizing religion (Byrne 1988, Saler 1993, Smart 1988). These scholars have suggested that Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" provides a way of defining religion without resorting to a singular (essential) element (gods, the sacred, belief in the transcendent) to distinguish religion from not-religion. In this section of the paper, I analyze Peter Byrne's (1988) explicitly Wittgensteinian approach to the question, followed by a discussion of Timothy Fitzgerald's critique of Byrne's article as a covertly essentialist argument. I will then present arguments made by Jonathan Z. Smith (1998) Benson Saler (1993) and Timothy Fitzgerald (1996, 1997, 2000) on the topic, and respond to them using Wittgenstein's analysis of language games.

Peter Byrne argues that a denotative definition of religion should be our starting point. That is, we might begin with examples of religion (1988:10). Like Talliaferro (1998), he suggests that the most obvious examples of "religion" are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This list is a kind of shorthand for the kind of phenomena that we would identify as religion, for other things that resemble one of these traditions. As I observed earlier, this approximates the consensus that underlies most of the definitional debates in the sociology of religion.

While most of those who have defined religion in the past have been concerned with uncovering and identifying the <u>necessary conditions</u> of religion, Byrne proposes a number of sufficient conditions for identifying "religion". But he excludes necessary conditions, since these imply an essence of religion[vi]. He writes

> ...our list of dimensions and differentiae of religion...allow[s] a number of different statements of sufficient conditions for something's being a religion to be produced, since we know that the possession of a significant number of these features in varying combinations will be enough to enable something to be a religion (1988:10).

In order to get this story straight, it is worth quoting Wittgenstein at length on "family resemblances". In this passage on "games", we could easily exchange "religion" for "games", and the examples of games for examples of religion. In this famous passage, Wittgenstein writes:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic Games, and so on. What is common to them all?— Don't say "There <u>must</u> be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "—but <u>look and see</u> whether there is anything in common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to <u>all</u> but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! Look for example at board games; with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you will find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out and others appear. When we pass next to ball games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. —Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of [solitaire]. In ball games there is

winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how many similarities crop up and disappear.

> And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail (1968: I §66).

Wittgenstein thus demonstrates the futility of our searches for an essence of a simple concept such as "Game". There is no essence of Game, but rather a series of "family resemblances" (1968: I § 68) between the things we <u>call</u> "games". Thus, if we are looking to define "religion" we should not be looking for <u>the</u> element that distinguishes religion from not-religion, but we should explore a set of family resemblances between things that we <u>call</u> religion.

Timothy Fitzgerald (1996), whose arguments in favor of abolishing the concept of "religion" altogether I will discuss shortly, has pointed to a number of different problems with Byrne's (1988) family resemblance approach to religion.   Fitzgerald argues that in Byrne's argument, the

> concept of religion must have some essential characteristic, and if it does not, then the family of religion becomes so large as to be practically meaningless and analytically useless (1996:216).

Fitzgerald argues that if "religion" is not a hopelessly vague, theological term (and he firmly believes that it is), it must have an essence in Byrne's conception. Indeed, as Fitzgerald observes, the "sacred" repeatedly sneaks back into Byrne's argument, and effectively functions as a necessary condition for distinguishing religion from not-religion. According to Fitzgerald,

> The only point that "family resemblances" seems to establish in practical terms is that the word religion can be, or rather is, used in many different contexts and does not require an essence to give it meaning– except the sacred (1996:227).

Fitzgerald's observation that there is an essentialist, reified notion lurking in the background of Byrne's discussion seems warranted. That is, for Byrne, there "really is" such a thing as religion– akin to the platonic theory of "Gameness" that Wittgenstein so effectively dismantled– it's just terribly difficult to define. It is a complicated thing that requires a flexible approach to adequately "capture" it. Fitzgerald argues that Byrne's use of Wittgenstein is simply a way of "evading the charge of being involved in a meaningless activity..." (2000:93). The problem, however, is not with the general conception of "language games" - which Fitzgerald does not seem to understand- but that Byrne does not push Wittgenstein's analysis far enough.

How then, does Wittgenstein suggest that we discriminate between "games" and "non-games"? He writes:

> ...how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word "game") (1968: I §68).

Thus, there is no "natural" boundary to "religion", but we can define one if we want to (even if the line has been drawn in many ways before).   Jonathan Z. Smith advocates just this ('draw your own boundary') approach to the definition of religion in a recent article. He writes:

> "Religion" is not a native term; it is created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept like "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon (1998:281-2).

By arguing that "religion" is a second order academic concept, Smith thus provides the freedom for academics to define their own terms of reference. There is some advantage to this argument, as it removes the question of an essence, or the possibility of seeing it as a reality "sui generis"[vii] (cf. McCutcheon 1997). "Religion" becomes a local language game for the academic study of religion, as Lyotard (1984) proposed for all scientific pursuits after the death of meta-narratives. In a similar spirit, Roger O'Toole argues that the best yardstick to measure a definition of religion is not its "truth", but rather its usefulness for the sociology of religion (1984). Both of these arguments are consistent with Wittgenstein's notion of "language games", in which the "meaning" of a word is best understood by its use (1968).

Anthropologist Benson Saler (1993) has developed an approach to the definition of religion that has clear parallels with the local language games approach developed by Jonathan Z. Smith, and advocated by O'Toole and Lyotard. In his brilliant book, Conceptualizing Religion, Saler argues that religion is a Western "folk category" which is nonetheless useful in studying "other cultures". Like Peter Byrne (1988), he argues that we can usefully conceptualize religion using a family resemblance approach. However, since

"religion" is first and foremost a Western folk-category, we should acknowledge the point from which "we" begin our analyses- with the prototype of the monotheistic traditions- Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Much like my argument about the implicit conception of religion used by sociologists, Saler argues that the history of anthropological attempts to understand "other" cultures' "religions" depends on implicit comparisons between Christianity (and its closest relations, Judaism and Islam) and the beliefs, practices and rituals of "other" societies. These monotheistic traditions are not just three examples of the kind of things we call religion "religion"– as I have been arguing in this paper– they are rather prototypes of "religion".

While I agree with most of what Saler writes in his book, his conclusion is, I think, totally inadequate. It almost seems as if Saler wants to develop a non-essentialist conception of religion for use by 18th century European explorers, philosophers and Christian missionaries, or for 19th and early 20th century anthropologists (cf. Byrne 1989; J. Smith 1998). What Saler is proposing is just how these historical figures decided what is religion and what is not religion in "primitive" and "oriental" societies by making explicit comparisons with the (Christian) religion of their own social milieu. The difference, of course, is that Saler builds a moment of self-reflection into the process, and is fully aware that "religion" is a folk category. Whether this approach is adequate for the 21st century is another question.

In contrast to Saler, Smith and O'Toole, for Timothy Fitzgerald (1996, 1997, 2000) the way that "religion" is used in local academic language games is precisely the problem. He argues that (among comparative religionists) religion is a covertly theological term, premised on an ontological category of the sacred. Those who use the term without a covert theological agenda (he uses the examples of anthropologists and sociologists) are merely

misled into using terminology that comes with Judeo-Christian theological and Western ideological baggage.   Fitzgerald further argues that the concept "religion" offers nothing of value to scholars seeking to understand particular social and cultural formations.   In analyses of non-Western societies, like Japan and India, the concept merely distorts our analyses by imposing Western concepts onto non-Western "data" (2000:4). Fitzgerald argues that the best work done in departments of religious studies is really "cultural studies", or "theoretically informed ethnographic studies" which can do without, and is in fact better off without, "religion" at all. He argues that the use of the term "religion" just confuses matters, and distracts from fully social analyses.   While I certainly think we should develop fully social understandings of religion, I am not sure that we can do without the concept.

Fitzgerald argues that "religion" distorts the "data" in a way that other concepts do not. The "data" is independent and pre-existing. Interpretation can adequately "reflect", or alternately can "distort" the already given "data"[viii].   Most (non-positivist) sociologists would see this as a somewhat naïve view.   Social theorists writing in the critical tradition (Lukacs 1971, Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) or interpretive tradition (Giddens 1976; see also Rorty 1991a, Taylor 1985), and even functionalist theorists like Parsons (1968), argue that there is no such thing as "data" which is independent of interpretation.

In his fascinating discussion of rituals, practices and values in Japan, Fitzgerald argues that what these are about is not religion, but rather "Japaneseness" (2000:159-218). While he is aware that "Japaneseness" is a hegemonic national project, tied to hierarchy, deference, and the exclusion of outsiders, he treats "Japan" as a relatively unproblematic concept. Nationalists will tell you that "nations" are somehow natural things, but non-nationalist students of nations and nationalism will point out that these are "imagined communities" (cf. Hobsbawm 1990; Wallerstein 1991 and especially Anderson 1990).   My

point is obviously not that "Japan" is not real, but that it is no less of a social construct than "religion". Nations may be imagined entities, but that does not mean that nations are not real, or that they do not have real consequences. The case of India is in some ways even more obvious than Japan (see Wallerstein's article "Does India exist?"(1991)). And yet, Fitzgerald has no problem referring to the "sociologists of India"– why not "sociologists [or anthropologists, psychologists, historians] of religion"?

While it is not at all clear that we should want to escape from the discourse of religion, it is not even clear that it is possible. Fitzgerald himself does not seem to be able to. First, "religion" operates as a background category in his writing. For example, a majority of his publications (cited in Fitzgerald 2000) are in journals or books that contain the word "religion" or "religious". This sets the horizon for his discourse, and enables his readers to understand that he is talking about "religion", even if he were able to avoid the "R" word. Second, some of his language- discussion about "transcendence" (albeit properly de-ontologized) and even more importantly "soteriology" refers (even as it doesn't refer) to religion (cf. 1997:93-95). His language remains within chains of signification that make sense only insofar as they are linked to "religion". His use of "soteriology", as if it were a "neutral" or "objective" and most importantly "non-theological" word (cf. 2000:121ff) is particularly surprising. Look up the term in any dictionary and you will probably find some variant of "Theol. The doctrine of Salvation" (Oxford English Dictionary)[ix].

By arguing that we should not use the word "religion" at all in social studies, Fitzgerald places ~~religion~~ under erasure (Derrida 1997). By showing that it is almost possible to avoid using the term in academic work on "religion", he sends the concept to the cleaners, demonstrating that when we talk about "religion", we are (really!) talking about "culture" (1997:96). Wittgenstein writes, "[s]ometimes an expression has to be withdrawn

from language and sent for cleaning, - then it can be put back into circulation"(1980:39). It seems to me that although the term needs cleaning– and doubtless it will again– as academics, we also need it in circulation because "[r]eligion [already] circulates in the world…it imposes itself in a particularly palpable manner within the conceptual apparatus of international law and global political rhetoric" (Derrida 1999:29).

"Religion", Jonathan Z. Smith argues, is an entirely second order academic term which we can use as we want. Timothy Fitzgerald argues that it is a second order ideological academic term, which we should not use at all.   Benson Saler argues that it is a second order "folk category" that is nonetheless analytically useful for studying "other" cultures. I think we lose something important in each approaches– ironically in each case– because they do not pay enough attention to the social dimensions of the concept. "Religion" is not a word that is used primarily, or even most often, by scholars. Non-academics make far more use of it, and they do not use it arbitrarily. Nor could they likely (once the word has been learned or introduced) avoid using it entirely.   Wittgenstein argued that although we can (even arbitrarily) define words how we want to, this is not how we usually know what words mean. Pace Benson Saler and Timothy Fitzgerald, it is not just a Western (academic) concept– at least not anymore.

 Wittgenstein asks the question, "How do I know that this color is red?— It would be an answer to say: 'I have learnt English' " (1968: I §381). Similarly, we can ask, 'how do I know that this is religion?'— 'I have learnt English (or French, German, Japanese, Hindi, etc.)'.   People use "religion" as part of their "common language game".   When the census or survey researchers ask North Americans, "What is your religion?", or some other variant of this question, people know how to use, and make sense of the word. People will answer "Christian", "Jewish", "Hindu", "Buddhist" or "I am an atheist". Even those who reject the

identification of their beliefs and practices with "religion" will give an answer that is appropriate for the question that is asked of them. People who respond saying "nothing in particular" (which still means something), or respond that they are "spiritual" rather than "religious", recognize the relationship between what they are being asked and the answer they give. Despite the very significant differences in what they actually believe, they know how to use the word "religion", and recognize the set of phenomena that we are talking about. This is not insignificant. As Wittgenstein puts it, "[e]ssence is expressed in grammar" (1968: I §371). Or, as we might now prefer to say, it is expressed in "discourse". The discourse of "religion" is part of the common language game we share.

Part of Fitzgerald's critique of "religion" is that it is a Western social construction that has no meaning in non-Western cultures, and simply serves to distort our analysis. Although we can trace the genealogy of religion to particular social transformations in Western Europe during the rise of capitalism and the enlightenment, it has become (obviously translated into different languages) a global category. To suggest, as Fitzgerald seems to, that "religion" has no meaning in Japan or India because it is a "foreign" word is not quite true. "Religion" has been imposed as an important legal term in more and more countries, as states have tried to regulate, separate themselves from, or provide freedom to practice it. "Religion" has become part of the global political-economic discourse, enshrined, for example, in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[x]. This has been translated (more or less adequately, no doubt) into more than 300 different languages, from Abhkaz to Zulu, suggesting that the concept has a kind of global currency[xi]. Not all states around the world have accepted article 18, nor has it been implemented fully- but the discourse of religion (and its non-English equivalents) has meaning. It is a concept that people know how to use, that is used, and is interpreted.

There is clearly variation in the way that the "religion" words are used in different contexts[xii]. But the general term is translatable, and people know how to identify what they do (or do not do) in relation to "religion". This is well exemplified by the "World Values survey" conducted by Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues (2000). This massive research project involved surveys conducted in more than 50 countries around the world. In each country, respondents were asked what their "religion" is, and whether they identified themselves as "religious". In the Japanese survey, 60% of those asked to identify their religion indicated "none" while the rest identified themselves as members of a particular "religion". While I certainly do not want to oversimplify a complex culture, it does appear that "religion" has local meaning, corresponding (albeit in a very rough way) to our concept. The fact that this question can be asked at all, and the fact that people know how to respond, suggests that this is not a totally meaningless term. The same is true in India, where the survey has been successfully conducted in seven language groups[xiii]. In response to this question, 84% of Indians identified themselves as Hindu, 8% as Muslim, and only 2% said that they had no religion.

Religion may be a Western folk category, as Benson Saler (1993) has argued, but it is not just a Western folk category anymore. Imagine, on the basis of Saler's definition, telling a devout Hindu that what she does is "religion" because it is like the practices Islam, or a Buddhist priest that his beliefs are "religion" because they are like Christian doctrine. These people can understand their beliefs and practices as part of a family of kinds of things that are called "religion" (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Hinduism, etcetera) without putting prototypical priority on any one of them. Perhaps the devout Hindu or the Tibetan Buddhist priest would even put prototypical priority on his or her own tradition-"Christianity is a religion because it is like Hinduism [or Buddhism]". While most

anthropologists may begin (or even end) with what they know of "Western religion" (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) in studies of "other" cultures, I am not convinced that this is really adequate.

Saler's (1993) account of the semantics of the religion-as-folk-category seems a bit out of date even as it applies to his own (U.S.) culture. It is indubitably true that- because of the hegemony of Christianity in the U.S.- "gods" have seemed to be an <u>essential</u> element in the discourse of religion (legal and political, as well as academic). For this reason, he suggests that using monotheistic religions as prototypes, is, for the most part, appropriate. However, as Saler himself notes, the folk concept in the United States is changing, and non-theistic beliefs have, at least since the 1970s, been firmly recognized as "religion" in both public and legal discourse (1993: 22; see also McBride 1988). It neither deals with the later development of the folk category in "Christian" countries, nor the spread of the folk category elsewhere.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued that "religion" is a term that denotes a number of traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, <u>etcetera</u>. The "<u>etcetera</u>" is important, because it does not claim that this marks the boundaries of religion (there being no such thing, in <u>essence</u>), but it provides examples of what we mean by "religion". I have also argued that since there is no "essence" of religion, no such <u>thing</u> as religion, such a conception must be non-essentialist. Sociologists of religion agree that religion that is a social construction- I have argued that "religion" (as a concept) is, as well.

This non-essentialist conception of religion casts serious doubts on all reified, essentialist conceptions of religion, and should make us extraordinarily cautious about attributing predicates to religion, whether as a part of a theological or a critical statement. Scholars who fall into opposing camps have traditionally treated religion as an essence, and particular traditions as "manifestations" of that essence. Both religionists with a "liberal ecumenical theological agenda" (as Fitzgerald puts it) and those who want to develop "reductionist" explanations of religion often fall into the same trap of reifying "religion". Thus, if someone claims that religion is the manifestation of a sacred ontology, or that it is an illusion, they are turning concepts, relationships and names into things.

I am by no means suggesting that we are stuck with common sense conceptions of religion. Particular (and even essentialist) definitions of religion can be useful, interesting or illuminating for particular purposes. Defining religion in a way that bears little or no resemblance to common sense definitions can be important for "recontextualizing" phenomena (Rorty 1991), and developing new understandings of various phenomena[xiv]. This is an indispensable component of sociological studies– as long as we do not think we are defining what religion (really!) is.

Religion is best identified using a sociologically nominalist family-resemblance approach beginning by denoting particular traditions that are "religions", like Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and those traditions which resemble them in any number of ways (Byrne 1988, Talliaferro 1998). This also allows us to conceptualize "quasi-religions" in a fruitful way. What we conceptualize as quasi-religions are phenomena that are usefully interpreted and analyzed using the family of terms and categories (sacredness, sacrifice, ritual, salvation, sin, etc.) we have traditionally used to

understand "religions"[xv].   That is, they are not really sort-of-religions- but it can be useful to look at them in this way.

In our analyses of religion we need to pay close attention to the construction, reconstructions and transformations of the category of our analysis. While we are particularly well advised to be attentive to the stakes of the game within the Academy (cf. Fitzgerald 2000, McCutcheon 1997, Wiebe 1999), we need to take careful account of the extra-academic politics of category formation and boundary shifts (cf. Beckford 1999). Several examples will suffice: There have been numerous political contests over whether particular "cults" (such as <u>Aum Shinrikyo</u>) or self-help businesses (for example, Scientology) should be classed as "religion" for the purposes of tax exempt status. In times of conscription, there is often conflict over what kind of beliefs qualify an individual for conscientious objector status. In states that have explicit separation of "church" and state, there is often debate about what it is that needs to be separated from the state and what can be legally upheld as a belief or practice that qualifies as free from state intervention. These conflicts are not fundamentally about representing what a religion is (although they are often framed as such)– they constitute religion. There is no "outside" to the politics of naming religion- as Wittgenstein put it: "We are struggling with language. We are engaged in a struggle with language" (1980:11).

There is no essence of religion outside the discourse of religion. There is no religion <u>per se</u>, <u>pour soi,</u> or <u>an sich</u>. Of course, concepts like "religion" have real social consequences, and are important constitutive elements in the construction of global, national and local social formations. In that sense, however, there is such a "thing" as religion- or at least, it is a term we cannot do without- and we "know" what it means. In this respect, Wittgenstein should get the last word: "…the best that I can propose is that we should yield

to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the <u>application</u> of the picture goes" (1968: I §373 <u>emphasis original</u>).

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Notes

[i] I am grateful to Roger O'Toole, John H. Simpson, Andrew Paravantes, Heidi Peterson, Sarah McMillan, Péter Török and Tish Langlois for their constructive criticism and helpful conversations. Many thanks also due to my companions in the Sunday evening gatherings of critical sociologists in Toronto for listening and providing encouraging, insightful critiques.

[ii] My discussion will be, of course, highly selective. For a more comprehensive overview of the definition debate, see especially O'Toole (1984: chapter 2), and Lambert (1991), but also Blasi (1998) Beckford (1989) and Turner (1991).

[iii] The same critiques could be made of the so-called micro-functionalist definitions, such as Geertz (1973), Luckmann (1967) and Tillich (1951). See Blasi (1998).

[iv] Russell McCutcheon, in his Manufacturing Religion (1997:128), argues that Cantwell Smith's theological agenda undergirds this book, as an attempt to undercut naturalistic explanations of religion. While I have no reason to pre-empt "naturalist" or "reductionist" accounts (even if I find both of these terms extraordinarily unfortunate), I nonetheless find Smith's genealogy of "religion" both convincing and useful.

[v] Smith provides a history of the way the word religion has been used, rather than offering an argument of what religion is based on its etymology (cf. Turner 1991). I share Hans Georg Gadamer's (1998) suspicion of attempts to understand the concept religion by an appeal to etymology. In the case of religion, the etymology is at best uncertain anyway.

[vi] I have not outlined Byrne's sufficient conditions here, since the elements themselves are the least satisfying aspect of his argument, and are, in most respects inferior to the essentialist definitions which are routinely used by sociologists of religion. Fitzgerald (1996) provides an excellent critique of this aspect of Byrne's conception of religion.

[vii] Sociologists use the term "sui generis" in a different sense, dating back to Durkheim (1915), which always indicates something social rather than the trans-social conception of the comparative religionists. Here I am following the usage in religious studies.

[viii] Fitzgerald is not as explicit as I am putting it here. He would, I suspect not accept this view as I have put it here. I do think, however, that this is a mode of thinking that pervades his analysis of this topic.

[ix] The O.E.D. proceeds to give two examples from Christian theology.

[x] "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (United Nations [1948] 2000).

[xi] Of course it should also be noted that English has itself become a kind of global language, facilitating capitalist

commerce, as well as diplomacy and science. English is an official language in 80 countries in the world, and spoken by people in numerous others.

[xii] I have discussed the concept of "religion" in different cultures and languages with sociologists from a number of different societies (Turkey, Hungary, China, Japan, Iran, Nigeria), and although there are significant differences in the connotative semantics of the term "religion" as a denotative term in these places, the term is remarkably equivalent.

[xiii] I am grateful to Seiko Yamakazi (coordinator of the Japanese survey) and Professor Sandeep Shastri (one of the coordinators of the Indian survey) for providing me with the information on this point, as well as to Emi Ooka, who discussed the Japanese version of the survey with me. Professor Shastri (personal correspondence) suggested that while it was somewhat difficult to come up with terms that were strictly equivalent and comparable across linguistic groups, the general conception of "religion" is not a completely alien concept. The fact that a question can even be asked in a language is itself indicative of what I am pointing to here.

[xiv] "What a Copernicus or a Darwin really achieved was not the discovery of a true theory but of a fertile new point of view" (Wittgenstein 1980:18).

[xv] For example: Walter Benjamin on capitalism (1996); Jill Dubisch on health food (1989); Michelle Lelwicka on weight-loss (2000); Roger O'Toole on political 'sects' (1977); W. Lloyd Warner (1953) on American symbolism; Shils and Young on the British Monarchy (1953); Michael Jindra on Star Trek fandom (2000); Joseph Price (2000) on Sport.