

DEBATING THE ACADEMIC  
STUDY OF RELIGION

What is  
Religion  
?

Edited by AARON W. HUGHES &  
RUSSELL T. McCUTCHEON

# What Is Religion?

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AARON W. HUGHES

RUSSELL T. MCCUTCHEON

**OXFORD**  
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*This volume is dedicated to the scholarly virtue of critical engagement.*

It is not from our prejudices, passions or habits that we should demand the elements of the definition.

—Émile Durkheim,  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)

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## Preface

The predicament facing early career scholars in the humanities has long been a concern of ours, and so the prior project that we coedited, *Religion in 5 Minutes* (Equinox, 2017), by design largely involved authors who were near the start of their own careers, either still completing their PhDs or not (hopefully yet) in tenure-track jobs. It was aimed at the wider reading public as well as students in introductory classes (though it was hardly a textbook). Since these readerships continue to strike us as significant and because we are both rather dissatisfied with many of the resources that have been published for such audiences, we decided to coedit another such resource but, this time, decided that inviting senior scholars might be a nice change of pace. Because we also both lament the silos in which our specializations as well as a variety of structures within the field place us (i.e., the way our publishing, grant applications, and conferences are organized, let alone our teaching and hiring decisions), we reasoned that a novel project would invite people who, because of their differing specializations, do not normally converse with one another, asking them to do just that for a change. And given our shared concern for the identity and future of the field, it seemed that proposing they each complete a sentence that simply began “Religion is . . .” might be an interesting place to start—a beginning that provided an opening for someone else in the group to write a critical response, which, in turn, offered the original author a chance to say something in reply.

And so, you now have in front of you the result: a diverse selection of seventeen leading scholars of religion, all of whom work in very different subspecialties, working with each other’s attempts to say what they think religion is—or is not. For some, religion is a thing that does something or perhaps a sentiment that animates action, while for others the sentence might just as well have been “Religion is merely a word and nothing more.” While we certainly have our own understanding of how the field ought to be constituted, a topic on which we have each written in the past, we reasoned that there was something to be gained by inviting as wide a group as we could imagine to engage with one another in a public setting—such as in the pages of a book written for a wide readership—and, as editors, stepping back to

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let the contributors get on with it. We thus offer readers a sampling of the field, something to be read akin to how one reads a culture or an ethnography, and then invite them to draw conclusions of their own about the state of the field today. We hope that readers will consider these statements and the responses/replies on not just what religion is but also on what the study of religion is, what scholars of religion do when they carry out their work, and the limits of this field (if, that is, readers conclude that it has any).

You might very well find yourself agreeing with one of more of the following statements or the critical replies they inspired. However, our hope is that you consider the breadth of this modern academic field, as exemplified in this volume, and arrive at a decision of your own on what you think the field ought to be doing and how it ought to look, all based on what it is that the following contributors say they're doing when they talk about this thing they each call religion. For, as already noted (and expanded upon, a little, in the introduction), we have our own sense about all of this, but felt that our service in this book was not repeating our views yet again but, instead, creating a space for some unexpected pairings from a range of writers in hopes of learning something new about how our peers see the field and the work of others who occupy it.

For this reason the book ends with an appendix that takes its cue from the still-cited appendix of a book that was published over a hundred years ago. Our appendix seeks to provide an even wider range of definitions of religion or statements on what it means to define—some classic and well-known, others contemporary—along with our own brief, critical comments on each. We do this hoping readers will see these as yet more places where critical rejoinders of the reader's own could be offered in order to explore some of the unexamined assumptions that might be lurking there or throughout the field as a whole.

Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon

# Introduction

*Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon*

In the well-known and once widely cited appendix to his 1912 book, *A Psychological Study of Religion*, James Leuba (1912: 339–63) provides his reader with forty-eight definitions of “religion,” which he subsequently divides into three categories: the intellectualist, the affectivistic, and the vol-untaristic. He trusts that the perusal of these definitions “will not bewilder the reader, but that he [or she] will see in them a splendid illustration both of the versatility and the one-sidedness of the human mind in the description of a very complex yet unitary manifestation of life” (339). The first definition offered is that of F. Max Müller (credited by many with establishing this intellectual field over a hundred years ago), from his 1873 *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (not insignificantly, perhaps, dedicated to the American essayist, poet, and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson). His definition begins with the statement “Religion is a mental faculty or disposition, which, independent of, nay in spite of, sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names, and under varying degrees.” Whether or not we agree with Müller, and whether or not we agree with Leuba’s particular taxonomy or types of definitions, the locution “religion is . . .” has long resided at the heart of our collective enterprise, setting the table for our contributors.

The nonconfessional, academic field of religious studies (as it is often called, though it goes by other names as well, including the history of religions and comparative religion, even the science of religion) that has developed since those early introductory essays were published ostensibly spends a lot of time with “religion” and its attendant adjective and the various nouns it usually qualifies. We therefore study not only religions, in the plural, and the supposed thing that animates them (religion in the singular) but also religious experiences, religious texts, religious rituals, religious institutions, and so on. A plethora of academic articles and books are written annually about all of these topics, but, at least in our experience as their readers, said works

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rarely focus on what makes something a “religion.” That is, they often fail to offer an explicit definition and, in our opinion, often just use some common-sense understanding that their authors assume to be shared by their readers or which the author happened to grow up hearing and therefore using, whether conscious of this habit or not. What is more, many of these studies tend to focus on the local or the specific (these particular Hindus here and now, or those specific Muslims then and there), rarely entertaining what religion may or may not be on a much larger scale—and thus never confronting just why the writer was able to group all those people called Hindus together, much less mention them so naturally in the same sentence as people called Muslims, Confucians, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Daoists, etc., etc. After all, if something is designated *as* a religious text here and then something else has that same attribute there, must they not have something in common? In fact, so problematic is the term as a perceived cross-cultural phenomenon that some scholars have even called for us to cease and desist from its deployment altogether. Instead, they advise that, regardless whether the people we study call themselves or the things they do religious, scholars should dissolve those things into far wider notions of culture, ideology, or worldview, thereby seeing those things formerly known as religion or religious as but another routine instance of ideology, for example.

What we hope is becoming evident is that just what “religion is” is now a highly contentious topic among scholars, not to mention the public at large. It is not difficult to find people in the U.S. or Europe, for instance, claiming that mandating the display in public government buildings of the motto “In God We Trust” or Christian crucifixes is not religious but a sign of this other thing they call heritage—thereby ensuring, or so they argue, that such mandates are constitutional and therefore legal. But just what is going on behind the scenes during these moments when something is said to be religious (or not)? Who gets to decide what makes something religious or a religion, or not? What are the discourses and the assumptions that produce religion as an item to be discussed, much less carried out or performed? Since we maintain that these assumptions and these discourses do not fall from heaven, and are thus not self-evident or obvious, religion as a concept ought to be defined—and defined not just explicitly but with some precision, at least if scholars are using the term. In what follows, then, leading scholars of religion have been invited to provide their definitions in a more explicit manner than perhaps is usual, and to consider each other’s definitions, all in an attempt to nudge along a particular conversation among them. While one certainly may not

agree with all of their terms or assumptions and conclusions, taken together readers will be able to gauge the state of the field at the current moment.

But what, you may be asking at this point, is religion to us, the editors? As our dearly departed colleague Jonathan Z. Smith remarked in his 1998 essay “Religion, Religions, Religious,” it would seem that Leuba was both correct and incorrect in his desire for definitions of religion. According to Smith,

It was once a tactic of students of religion to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that “the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task” (King 1954). Not at all! The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways. Besides, Leuba goes on to classify and evaluate his list of definitions. “Religion” is not a native term; it is a term 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 such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon. (281–282)

Smith here reminds us, as he so poignantly did throughout his career, that there is nothing special about the category “religion.” If anything, it is a term that, though often imprecise, defines our area of study. This should be obvious to all, but alas, it is not. Not to be undone, the American Academy of Religion (AAR; the largest U.S. professional association for scholars who study religion) has also gotten into the game of defining religion. According to their website,

Because it crosses so many different boundaries in human experience, religion is notoriously difficult to define. Many attempts have been made, however, and while every theory has its limitations, each perspective contributes to our understanding of this complex phenomenon. . . . The variety of approaches in the attempt to define religion can be imposing and sometimes frustrating. Discussion about widely differing approaches to the subject matter, however, gives the study of religion its vitality, and most students and scholars in the field appreciate its many crosscurrents.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AAR, “What Is Religion?,” accessed July 1, 2019, <http://studyreligion.org/what/index.html>.

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Rather than follow the lead of our national guild—which somehow knows religion to be more complex than the various attempts to define it, an intuition that we find to be an unscholarly basis for our work—we maintain, following Smith, that religion is nothing more (nor less) than an imagined category that people use (often quite effectively, of course) when talking about, and thereby making sense of, their situations in the world. There are therefore no “religions” in the world, we would further claim, other than those movements, institutions, claims, and practices that are classified as such by those using the category at specific moments for specific effect—whether that means scholars going about their studies or the people scholars may study who are themselves going about their daily business. That not everyone in the world even uses this Latin-derived term, or some local variant or analogue, when talking about their world is something that we need to keep in mind as well. Claims about “the Hindu religion,” for instance, may tell us far more about the observer making such a claim than the people so named by an observer who makes sense of an unfamiliar situation by means of a word in their vocabulary.

But this view is not necessarily shared by our contributors, and that is by design. A field does not make advances by means of backslapping conversations among people who already agree with one another. Instead, we tend to think fields of study grow at points of disagreement and debate. That is how we come across assumptions we never knew we had, inconsistencies we had failed to see, and where we identify implications we had never thought of before. So what follows is, we trust, a nonconventional volume inasmuch as the contributors all agreed to do some work, in public, at these very sites of difference and possible disagreement. Rather than begin with the premise, à la AAR, that religion is something out there waiting to be defined, we decided to ask our contributors to define at the very outset what they consider “religion” to be, to the best of their abilities, taking “Religion is . . .” as their shared prompt.

The initial definitions that were offered by each of our contributors serve as a point of entry into thinking about the study of religion as practiced or made possible by that particular definition (or in spite of it). In this, each person who offered a definition of religion subsequently was invited to comment on and respond to that of another scholar included in the volume. To this end, we have asked all of our contributors to play three roles in this book:

1. Offer their own definitive “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph that succinctly but directly conveys their thoughts on the substance, origin, or function/effects of religion that warrant scholarly study today.

2. Respond to the “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph of one of the other contributors to the volume in a detailed and substantive essay/commentary that uses their colleague’s opening sentence/paragraph as the springboard into a larger discussion of that position’s history/context and, in the respondent’s view, its merits, limits, or future possibilities.
3. Reply to a respondent’s critical commentary on their own “Religion is . . .” sentence/paragraph, allowing readers to eavesdrop on the scholarly back-and-forth that characterizes debate in the modern field.

The results, we trust, provide a refreshing take on religion as these scholars actively engage with one another in a set of textual conversations that reveal some of the tensions, fissures, and possibilities of religious studies at what we think to be an important moment in the field’s history. While we certainly do not mean for these definitions, or the conversations they produce, let alone the list of contributors, to be read as definitive, we do hope that the variety of scholars and viewpoints in the following pages will spur others to think more broadly and, yes, more critically (with precision, as we say) about the work that this term “religion” is doing as they use it in their own studies or as they make what seems to be the most casual or self-evident claims about their world—i.e., the things that populate their world and the ranked relationships into which we place them by calling something a this or a that.

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