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On Defining Religion

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Translations of words and concepts can never be perfect, but they can be more or less effective at conveying ideas in specific circumstances. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2025) suggest that applying the insights of Natural Semantic Metalanguage offers a useful way for anthropologists to deploy analytic concepts across cultural and linguistic divides. By generating definitions using a limited set of simple, easily translatable words to define more complicated concepts, the authors make a case for the construction of a new analytical anthropological vocabulary. To demonstrate this utility, they choose as examples the concepts of art and religion. In this brief response, I focus on their efforts to define (and redefine) religion.

Goddard and Wierzbicka distinguish two uses of religion in everyday speech and provide simple-language definitions for these two discrete usages. They then propose a third, stipulative definition that anthropologists could apply cross-culturally. Their first definition (religion-1) defines a singular term oriented around "God seen as personal and unique, as in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." Their second definition (religion-2) defines a plural term that "acknowledges that there is a plurality of beliefs that may offer answers to life's fundamental questions." Their third definition (religion-3) is broader still and tries to encapsulate the specific ways that the community of anthropologists have come to discuss religion.

The proposal is admirable for its creativity and clarity. The focus on using relatively simple, easily translatable terms dodges the common problem of defining religion with reference to other terms that are equally fuzzy and complicated (such as "the supernatural"; see Saler 1977). At the same time, however, their approach does seem to me to have some drawbacks, especially the authors' approach to generating a stipulative definition.

As the authors put it, “Stipulative definitions cannot be right or wrong, true or false: they can be only more or less useful, which, from the point of view of anthropology, means more or less useful for the purpose of investigating what humans hold in common and in what ways they differ.” Yet, the authors’ reasoning for the specific form of their stipulative definition introduces some tensions: On the one hand, the authors acknowledge, following the lead of Melford Spiro, that “arriving at an optimal definition of ‘religion’ as a comparative concept of anthropology is independent of whether such a concept is, or can be expected to be, universally applicable to human societies.” On the other hand, the authors place a high value on “inclusivity.” They write: “Although the everyday ‘religion-2’ concept is expanded and diversified compared with ‘religion-1’, it is still not inclusive enough to subsume many ways of thinking, acting and feeling that modern and contemporary anthropologists discuss under the banner of ‘religion’.” The goal of “inclusivity” seems to me to be at odds with the goal of “investigating what humans hold in common and in what ways they differ.” To be more specific, the focus on inclusivity short-circuits the interpretive process and decreases our ability to see differences (Nongbri 2024).

That is to say, anthropologists and scholars in other fields regularly employ rather loose definitions of religion and assume the universality or near-universality of religion as a native concept (see the literature cited in Nongbri 2013). Developing a definition out of the way *anthropologists* talk about religion (as opposed to a definition more closely tied to everyday speech, as ethnocentric as such speech may be) already presumes a high level of similarity about the ways people have organized their worlds across cultures and through time. By drifting from the more common ways that people talk about religion and seeking to be more inclusive, the authors’ stipulative definition loses its ability to discern difference. As the historian Jonathan Z. Smith has phrased it, “It is the very distance and difference of ‘religion’ as a second-order category that gives it cognitive power. …Indeed, the cognitive power of any translation, model, map, or redescription…is, by this understanding, a result of its difference from the phenomena in question and not its congruence. …A theory, a model, a conceptual category, *cannot simply be the data writ large*” (Smith 2000).

I suspect the authors' understandable impulse toward inclusivity is related to the history of the deployment of the concept of religion. As the authors note, the concept of religion crystallized in colonial settings of unequal power, and in such settings the claim that a group of people "has no religion" was a value judgement that could have negative real-world consequences. In a contemporary anthropological setting, however, the determination of the presence or absence of "religion" among a given group should ideally imply no such value judgements; it is simply an aid in assessing similarity and difference—nothing more and nothing less. A stipulative definition that more closely aligns with one of the "everyday" speech definitions of religion may thus be more useful for cross-cultural comparative exercises.

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