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*Religio*. 2014, vol. 22, iss. 1, pp. [3]-27

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/130352>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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# *Has the Cognitive Science of Religion (Re)defined “Religion”?*

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“*Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio;  
si tamen quaerenti explicare velim, nescio.*”  
(Augustinus Aurelius)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Do we even need a definition of religion?

After much ink spilled over thousands upon thousands of pages and no *communis opinio* in sight, the quest for the definition of religion seems to be doomed to failure from the onset. We find ourselves in a situation where there is no consensus even on whether there is a consensus on the pre-theoretical (!) use of the term “religion”;<sup>2</sup> likewise, there is no generally accepted answer to the question of whether the definition of religion is even possible, and if so, whether it is necessary for the constitution of the scientific study of religion.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in spite of the obvious difficulties, the

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\* I would like to thank Aleš Chalupa, Jan Krátký and Radek Kundt for many helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Unless indicated otherwise, translations from non-English texts are my own.

1 Augustinus, *Confessiones* XI,14, Luc Verheijen (ed.), *Sancti Augustini Confessionum libri XIII*, (Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 27), Turnhout: Brepols 1981.

2 Andrew M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions, Language Games, and the ‘Essence’ of Religion”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14/1, 2002, 61-83: 67, argues that the participants of the debate know what religion actually is, they only have difficulties in arriving at a connotative definition; likewise, Daniel L. Pals, “Is Religion a *Sui Generis* Phenomenon?”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55/2, 1987, 259-282: 261, notes that there is a pre-theoretical “Vorverständnis” on what religion is. In contrast, Craig Martin, “Delimiting Religion”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21/2, 2009, 157-176: 167, strictly denies that there is any singular pre-theoretical understanding of the term in question, because its use changes both diachronically and synchronically within the social context. Timothy Fitzgerald, “Religion, Philosophy and Family Resemblances”, *Religion* 26/3, 1996, 215-236: 215, concurs by noting that the term “religion” and its derivatives are used with multifarious meanings, “often with little to no critical reflection”.

3 Hideo Kishimoto, “An Operational Definition of Religion”, *Numen* 8/3, 1961, 236-240: 236, considers the definition of religion to be “an indispensable premise for the study of religion”; Břetislav Horyna, *Kritik der religionswissenschaftlichen Vernunft: Plädoyer für eine empirisch fundierte Theorie und Methodologie*, Stuttgart: Kohlham-

problem of the definition of religion should not be swept under the rug as idle theorizing, for two quite distinct reasons.

Firstly, several scholars have rightly drawn attention to a seemingly trivial fact that has nonetheless serious ramifications, namely, that the definition of religion is a miniature theory of religion.<sup>4</sup> Unless the study of religion wants to resign from accepting stringent theoretical assumptions and join Paul Feyerabend in his methodological anarchism,<sup>5</sup> it will eventually have to state the premises of its scientific program, and a definition of the very subject-matter that is being studied surely belongs to these premises. If we resign from attempting to provide at the very least an approximate definition, not only will the study of religion fail to demarcate the object of its study but it will also be at pains to formulate its basic theoretical postulates.

Secondly, the question of the definition of religion is emphatically not just armchair philosophy, but has important social consequences.<sup>6</sup> International and territorial laws habitually operate with the term “religion” – many of these grant the “freedom of religion” or the strict separation of Church and state (what today amounts in practice to the separation of religion and state), which has far-reaching consequences for the public

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mer 2011, 9, 15, states in a recent major study of the methodological bases of the study of religion that any attempt to define religion is an instance of methodological failure.

- 4 D. Pals, “Is Religion...”, 272; almost identical expression is used by Victoria S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining a Religion in a Multi-Cultural World”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59, 2006, 133-152: 137. Stewart E. Guthrie, “Opportunity, Challenge and a Definition of Religion”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1/1, 2007, 58-67: 64, very much in the same spirit, argues that “the problems of definition are also the problems of the theory”.
- 5 For a book-length treatment, see Paul Feyerabend, *Wider der Methodenzwang*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1986; the main theses of methodological anarchism, succinctly summarized by its creator himself, can be found in Paul Feyerabend, “Theses on Anarchism”, in: Matteo Motterlini (ed.), *For and Against Method*, Chicago – London: Chicago University Press 1999, 113-118.
- 6 Few scholars of religion seriously consider the possible social ramifications of their studies. Among those who do are, for instance, Murray L. Wax, “Religion as Universal: Tribulations of an Anthropological Enterprise”, *Zygon* 19/1, 1984, 5-20: 6; Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s ‘The Meaning and End of Religion’”, *History of Religions* 40/3, 2001, 205-222: 220; A. M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions...”, 80; V. S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining...”, 145-147.

education system,<sup>7</sup> the tax-exempt status of religious organizations<sup>8</sup> and the status of the conscientious objector.<sup>9</sup> In fact, legal scholars themselves at times search in vain for a solution to the definitional problem in the texts of specialists – and who else should be considered a specialist in answering the question “What is religion?” than a tenured professor at one of the many departments of religious studies throughout the world? –, yet they find nothing resembling a general consensus, which eventually prompts them to state with a considerable degree of irony that “academia has the luxury of discussion on whether the term ‘religion’ is hopelessly ambiguous, lawyers and jurors often do not”.<sup>10</sup> Although I largely agree with the “science-for-science” stance (that is, the main objective of science is the acquisition of knowledge, the public utility of which is only secondary), and while the study of religion should certainly not be politically motivated, it should nevertheless reflect on the possible social consequences of the theories it proposes.

Finally, it is worth considering the possibility that the apparent failure to define religion might not be due to the nature of the term “religion”, but results from our often critically unchallenged presuppositions of what a definition should achieve and how it operates.<sup>11</sup> Yet this is essentially a philosophical question. Consequently, I believe that some light could be shed on the problem of the definition of religion by examining the implicitly assumed, but rarely explicitly stated philosophical background behind the definitions of religion. In what follows, I will first review the scholarly literature associated with the cognitive science of religion and reconstruct what might be considered a “cognitive definition of religion”; then provide some historical context, especially in regard to what I term the “Tylor–

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7 Russell T. McCutcheon, “The Category ‘Religion’ in Recent Publications: A Critical Survey”, *Numen* 42/3, 1995, 284-309: 306. Donald Wiebe has been one of the most prominent critics of what he identifies as the infiltration of confessional (mainly protestant) theology into religious studies departments under the guise of the “science of religion”, see especially Donald Wiebe, “Theology and the Academic Study of Religion in Protestant America”, in: id., *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, New York: Palgrave 1999, 69-90.

8 Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*, New York: Free Press 2009, 436.

9 To include just one example from the distant past, when one of the most prominent philosophers of the early twentieth century, Bertrand Russell, objected to the war machine of the First World War, he was promptly dismissed from Trinity College (1916) and later even imprisoned (1918), while many Quakers could appeal to the status of conscientious objector on the grounds of their religious commitments.

10 Jeremy T. Gunn, “The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of ‘Religion’ in International Law”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16, 2003, 189-215: 191.

11 This has also been pointed out by W. Richard Comstock, “Toward Open Definitions of Religion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52/3, 1984, 499-517: 500.

Durkheim dichotomy” and to recent social constructionist approaches; and finally evaluate the worth of a definition of cognitive provenience in face of the difficulties and challenges posed by previous definitional practices.

## 2. The cognitive science of religion and the definition of religion

What follows is a sample selection of assertions concerning the nature of religion, reconstructed from the works of leading scholars associated with the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which, although by no means exhaustive, I consider representative of this particular theoretical approach (italics are mine):

- “All religions do share a feature: ostensible communication with *humanlike, yet nonhuman, beings* through some form of symbolic action.”<sup>12</sup>
- “For the purpose of discussion here, ‘religion’ designates a shared system of beliefs and actions concerning *superhuman agency*.”<sup>13</sup>
- “Religion is about the existence and causal powers of *nonobservable entities and agencies*.”<sup>14</sup>
- “Roughly, religion is (1) a community’s costly and hard-to-fake commitment (2) to a *counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents* (3) who master people’s existential anxieties, such as death and deception.”<sup>15</sup>
- “‘Religion’ is a concept that identifies the *personalistic counter-intuitive representations* and the related practices, institutions, etc. that are widely spread, literally believed, and actively used by a group of people in their attempts to understand, explain and control those aspects of life, and reality as a whole, that escape common sense and, more recently, scientific explanation.”<sup>16</sup>

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12 Stewart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, 197.

13 Justin L. Barrett, “Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4/1, 2000, 29-34: 29.

14 Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basic Books 2001, 7. Boyer introduces this statement as a “finding of anthropology”, but it resonates well with the concept of minimally counter-intuitive agents, around which his discussion of religion gravitates.

15 Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 4.

16 Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2003, 227.

- “For the present purposes, let us simply say that religion consists of any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to *supernatural agency*.”<sup>17</sup>
- “*Superhuman agents* are a force to be reckoned with; at least that’s what religion seems to be about. Religion involves doing rituals and other sorts of activities that are predicated on presumptions about what kind of beings supernatural agents are.”<sup>18</sup>
- “For my purposes, religion refers to the collection of beliefs related to the *existence of one or more gods*, and the activities that are motivated by those beliefs.”<sup>19</sup>

Further, it has to be noted that the work considered by many to be foundational for the cognitive approach to religion,<sup>20</sup> Lawson and McCauley’s *Rethinking Religion*, defines ritual *qua* religious ritual precisely on the condition of the inclusion of supernatural agents: “*All religious rituals involve superhuman agents* at some point or other in their representation. ... Every structural analysis of a religious ritual must include a superhuman agent in at least one of the rituals embedded in the ritual under analysis. This is to say that *all religious rituals either directly involve or presuppose the participation of the gods*.”<sup>21</sup>

17 Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 2004, 2.

18 Jason D. Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, 68. A few pages onwards, Slone elaborates further: “A religion involves postulations and presumptions that superhuman agents exist, and any religious system that includes such features counts, in most people’s minds, as more like a religion than one that does not (note that definitions follow from theories)” (*ibid.*, 71).

19 Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, West Conshohocken: Templeton Press 2011, 130.

20 Steven Engler – Mark Q. Gardiner, “Religion as Superhuman Agency: On E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion* (1990)”, in: Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion*, London – New York: Routledge, 22-38: 22.

21 E. Thomas Lawson – Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, 124. In a follow-up study, Robert N. McCauley – E. Thomas Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 20, the so-called “principle of superhuman agency” is upheld without any serious modifications: “Religious rituals, while engaging the same representational resources, possess a distinctive feature that marks them off not only from everyday actions but also from the other sorts of routine religious actions we mentioned above (such as standing at various points during a worship service). That distinctive feature is that religious rituals (in our technical sense) always presume an end point to such causal or rational explorations. In religious ritual representations things come to an end. Causal chains terminate; reasons find a final ground. In short, the buck stops with the gods.”

Closer examination of these statements reveals some remarkable facts:

(1) Firstly, barring some minor differences, every single assessment of the nature of religion cited above explicitly identifies superhuman, supernatural or counter-intuitive agents as a *differentia specifica* of religion: A belief or an action can be considered religious if and only if it entails the involvement of counter-intuitive agents. Since the acceptance of this principle is virtually unanimous in the CSR, I find it justified to speak about a “cognitive definition of religion” with the concept of counter-intuitive agents operating as its *definiens*. I understand this definition to be an ideal type, a hypothetical notion reconstructed on the basis of the statements about the nature of religion found in the works of authors affiliated with the CSR, although differences will necessarily be present between individual scholars and some would probably deny being in the definitional business at all, which brings us to the next point.

(2) Secondly, it is not without interest to observe the presentation of the varieties of the cognitive definition of religion – scholars generally proceed very carefully, with cautious, almost idiosyncratic qualifications such as “for the purpose of discussion here”, “roughly”, “for the present purposes”, “that’s what religion *seems* [italics mine] to be about”, “for my purposes”. If we consider (1) and (2) jointly, it would seem that scholars operating in the cognitive tradition all agree on a very robust *definiens* of religion, yet at the same time, the majority of them deliberately try to downplay the importance of the definition by suggesting that it is nothing more than an *ad hoc* construction of comparatively small value for the theory. While this peculiar instance of “cognitive dissonance” (pun intended) would merit further attention, I will presently focus on the reconstructed definition itself, not on the concomitant cautionary qualifications of scholars who introduce it.

(3) Thirdly, it would seem, at least *prima facie*, that this allegedly novel (some would say even revolutionary) approach to the study of religion returns all the way back to Edward Burnett Tylor and his animistic “minimal definition” of religion as a belief in spiritual beings. Jonathan Z. Smith even argues that “religion’s *sine qua non* ... is held consistently, whenever the issue of definition is explicitly being raised, to be ‘beliefs and practices that are related to superhuman beings’”.<sup>22</sup> One could reason-

22 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press 2004, 165. This statement, if applied to the history of the study of religion, is patently false. As we will see presently, Durkheim strongly opposed the definition of religion based on gods or supernatural beings and his approach has generated a strong following. For instance, David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, Chicago – London: The Chicago University Press 2002, 222, states that “[w]ithout wishing to

ably ask whether the whole field of the cognitive science of religion is not just too much ado about nothing and its claims to originality void.

(4) Lastly, the definition proposed by the CSR, with its emphasis on the role of evolutionary and cognitive constraints on the acquisition and transmission of cultural concepts, is not congruent either with the prevalent definitional approach, which uses the theoretical tools of language games and family resemblances and considers “religion” to be an unbound and/or socially constructed category, or with the social functionalist definition proposed almost a century ago by Durkheim as a direct critical response to Tylor’s animism mentioned above. I will therefore examine the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy concerning the essentialist definition of religion, the crux of which, as we will see, is closely related to the central concept of the CSR; then provide an overview of the non-essentialist approaches to the definition of religion; and, finally, sketch the main theoretical underpinnings of the cognitive definition of religion.

### 3. Essentialism and the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy

I find it instructive to start a discussion on essentialist definitions in the study of religion by looking at one of their very first instances in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*.<sup>23</sup> Socrates asks Euthyphro, an Athenian priest and self-professed expert in “all things religious” (“*tōn theiōn ... kai tōn hosīōn te kai anosīōn*”),<sup>24</sup> a seemingly trivial question: What is piety? Without any hesitation, Euthyphro answers with an ostensive definition – piety is what he himself is currently doing, namely prosecuting his father for a crime –, yet Socrates is unfazed by the answer. After all, he is not asking

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vindicate Durkheim in all respects, I think this definition is on the right track because it acknowledges the functional nature of religion”. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011, 1, in a recent landmark study of ancient religions, makes use of what he himself calls a “simplified Durkheimian definition”, which is almost indistinguishable from the original: “Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community.”

- 23 There is no space or need to discuss here the perennial problem of Socratic and Platonic scholarship, namely the attribution of the philosophical theses found in Platonic dialogues to either Socrates or Plato. *Euthyphro* is an early elenctic dialogue (Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press 1991, 46) and therefore usually associated with historical Socrates. More to the purpose of this article, it is to be noted that Aristotle credits Socrates with the first use of general definitions (“*to horizesthai katholou*”): W. David Ross (ed.), *Metaphysica*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1924, 1078b28–29.
- 24 Plato, *Euthyphro*, in: E. A. Duke et al. (eds.), *Platonis Opera* I, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995, 4e5–6 (referred to further as *Euthyphr.*).



for an example or even a list of pious or impious actions, but the criterion according to which one could identify any action as pious or impious (“*ekeino auto to eidos hō panta ta hosia hosia estin*”).<sup>25</sup> Euthyphro tries again with various other proposals,<sup>26</sup> but Socratic dialectical machinery renders every definition untenable and the dialogue eventually ends without any definitive answer as to the nature of piety. The methodological prerequisite for a definition is nonetheless clear: Every definition has to include the identification of a necessary and sufficient property for any criterion that demarcates clearly the term in question.<sup>27</sup>

If we now turn our attention to the competing definitions of religion proposed by Tylor and Durkheim, we will find the essentialist paradigm to be present in both, in spite of the unmistakable differences – Tylor’s definition is rather intellectual, Durkheim’s affective and functional;<sup>28</sup> Tylor’s is more exclusive (that is, compared to our pre-theoretical understanding, it brings under the umbrella of “religion” less than is expected), Durkheim’s more inclusive (marks as “religion” more than is pre-theoretically expected).<sup>29</sup> When Tylor considered primitive cultures in one of the foundational texts of modern anthropology, he came to the conclusion that we cannot do without at least a “rudimentary definition of religion”, which he found in “the belief in Spiritual Beings” or the doctrine of “Animism”,<sup>30</sup>

25 *Euthyphr.* 6d10-11.

26 Euthyphro defines piety variously as “that which is dear to gods” (“*to men tois theois prosfiles*”, *Euthyphr.* 6e10); “what all the gods love” (“*ho an pantes hoi theoi filōsin*”, *Euthyphr.* 9e1-2); “what is just” (“*dikaion*”, *Euthyphr.* 11e5); “knowledge of sacrifice and prayer” (“*epistēmēn tina tou thuein te kai eukhesthai*”, *Euthyphr.* 14c4-5).

27 More technically, as Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1996, 39, notes in a discussion of *Euthyphro*, “Socrates generally seems to be after (ideally) a definition of the form ‘F is(=) D,’ where there is a relation of mutual entailment and extensional identity between the definiendum F and definiens D, and where the definiens gives a complete explanation of why any individual action or thing x is F, an explanation that will put one in a position to recognize any F-instance x as being an F-instance.” An essentialist definition of this type, notwithstanding some modifications, has exerted profound influence throughout the history of Western thought. For instance, Spinoza, in his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* XIII.95, still defends an essentialist approach: “In order to be called perfect, a definition will have to explain the innermost essence of the thing [that is being defined] (*Definitio ut dicatur perfecta, debet intimam essentiam rei explicare*)”: Carolus Hermannus Bruder (ed.), *Benedicti de Spinoza Opera quae supersunt omnia* II, Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz 1844, 95.

28 V. S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining...”, 133-134.

29 Jack Goody, “Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem”, *The British Journal of Sociology* 12/2, 1961, 142-164: 144. According to M. L. Wax, “Religion as Universal...”, 14, patriotism would undoubtedly be classified as a religion, should we adopt Durkheim’s definition.

30 Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, London: John Murray 1871, 383-384.

which, as Samuel Preus notes, “constitutes not only the fundamental common denominator of religious history but of primitive society as a whole”.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the belief in spiritual beings constitutes the essence of religion. Deceivably simple, this definition amassed a large following, but not without sharp criticism from the founding father of another discipline of the humanities, the sociologist Émile Durkheim.

Durkheim argues that the Tylorian definition of religion as a belief in spiritual beings is untenable, because there exists a set of beliefs and actions which would undoubtedly be pre-theoretically considered as “religious”, yet (according to Durkheim) lack the necessary and sufficient property that Tylor singled out as the *definiens* of religion, that is, belief in supernatural beings. The set in question, namely Buddhism, is (in the interpretation of the French sociologist) clearly an atheistic religion, by virtue of which the definition proposed by Tylor happens to be falsified.<sup>32</sup> I leave aside evaluation of the integrity and accuracy of Durkheim’s depiction of Buddhism, on which even the specialists seem to be at odds,<sup>33</sup> or the question of whether there is such a thing as Buddhism in itself. What is important to note is that Durkheim’s argumentation comes dangerously close to the fallacy of false dichotomy,<sup>34</sup> since the French sociologist seems to be constructing his position in polar opposition to Tylor’s, as if these two proposals were the only ones permissible. Tylor’s definition singles out spiritual beings as the *definiens* of religion; Buddhism is atheistic; Buddhism is pre-theoretically clearly to be considered a religion; therefore Tylor’s definition is untenable; *therefore* Durkheim’s definition is true. I find it convenient to refer to this line of discussion as the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy, whose crux lies in the concept of spiritual beings as

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31 James Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1987, 132.

32 Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France 1960, 41-45 (first edition Paris: F. Alcan 1912).

33 Marco Orrù – Amy Wang, “Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31/1, 1992, 47-61: 59, consider Durkheim’s portrayal of Buddhism to be “seriously defective”; in contrast, Martin Southwood, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion”, *Man* (n. s.) 13/3, 1978, 362-379: 363, on the basis of his own fieldwork, states the following: “I found that what Durkheim wrote about Buddhism was substantially true, and impressively perceptive: his case against the applicability of the theistic conception to Buddhism requires little revision.”

34 M. Southwood, “Buddhism and the Definition...”, 368. This is not the only problem of Durkheim’s argument. Hans H. Penner, “The Poverty of Functionalism”, *History of Religions* 11/1, 1971, 91-97: 96-97, drawing on a previous work by one of the most influential philosophers of science in the twentieth century, Carl Hempel, argued against the inherent functionalism of Durkheim’s position – very successfully, in my opinion.

being either necessary (Tylor) or arbitrary (Durkheim) to the definition of religion, its borderline case being the interpretation of Buddhism.

Durkheim's own proposed definition of religion is a combination of an essentialist and functionalist approach, considering religion to be a "system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things – that is, things set apart and forbidden –, beliefs and practices which unite all those who adhere to them in a single moral community, called a church".<sup>35</sup> There is, of course, no mention of gods or supernatural beings, yet the definition is no less essentialist in nature than Tylor's, only the criterion by which it is possible to recognize an instance of religion as such is not the belief in spiritual beings, but an analytical category of the sacred<sup>36</sup> in conjunction with its moral function in the society. For Durkheim, religion is what religion does; and religion seems to constitute and regulate many important social relations while providing the participants with a specific moral code. This move then allows Durkheim to include Buddhism, in concert with our pre-theoretical expectations, in the herd of religions.

Before introducing a cognitive solution to the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy, a brief introduction to the variety of social constructionist approaches to the definition of religion is in order.

#### 4. "Power-innocent" social constructionism of religion

Though definitions of religion have traditionally been based on an essentialist definition introduced by the philosophers of classical antiquity and upheld throughout most of Western intellectual history, the tide started to turn decisively in the second half of the twentieth century. The change can once again be traced back to its philosophical pedigree, where the philosophy of late Wittgenstein played a major role. Abandoning his earlier "picture theory" of perfect parallelism between language and the world, between atomic formulae and atomic facts (though Wittgenstein never quite succeeded in explaining what these atomic facts actually are), exposed in the *Tractatus*, late Wittgenstein proposes a new theory of meaning based on the concept of "language games", where the meaning of the words is constituted solely by their use by competent speakers of a

35 É. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires...*, 65.

36 M. Orrù – A. Wang, "Durkheim, Religion...", 49-50. The term "sacred" has eventually become (in)famous, especially in its use by Mircea Eliade. J. Goody, "Religion and Ritual...", 151, denies that the sacred/profane dichotomy is present in all cultures; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, 23, criticizes the "phantom objectivity" of the term which veils its ideological underpinnings; B. Horyna, *Kritik...*, 31, objects to the *a priori* character of the "sacred", which makes serious scientific scrutiny impossible.

particular natural language. It is worth quoting the crucial passage from *Philosophical Investigations* in full:

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 *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look and see* whether there is anything in common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. ... And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. ... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances” ... For 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”).<sup>37</sup>

Now, suppose that the term “religion” is, in this important respect, of the same quality as the word “game”. If this obtains, it would not be surprising at all that there is no essential quality or specific difference which would constitute a general criterion for clear demarcation of the term. At the same time, this does not mean that the concept is completely arbitrary, for Wittgenstein views the “family resemblance” of particular words grouped under one collective term as an interconnected semantic network, which somehow unites all the particular instances of the collective, such as “game” or “religion”. This would mean that the problem, after all, does not lie with the word “religion”, but with our attempts to ask for an essentialist definition where none could possibly be found.

A historically influential critique of the essentialist concept of the definition of religion, though initially unrelated to Wittgenstein’s philosophy, has been put forward by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his work *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962).<sup>38</sup> Cantwell Smith analyzes the use of the no-

37 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Malden: Blackwell 2001, § 66, 68.

38 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991. T. Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic...”, 205, considers Cantwell Smith’s work to be the first to take a resolute stand against the essentialist definitions of religion. Yet it has to be noted that Cantwell Smith does so largely in order to pursue his own theological agenda and deconstructs the term “religion” only to mark a distinction between faith (the core of religion) and what he terms “cumulative tradition” (the mere outward manifestations of faith). R. T. McCutcheon, “The Category ‘Religion’...”, 286, argues plausibly that, for Cantwell Smith, religion is an “*a priori* mystery” and the sole aim of his intellectual strategy is to eliminate reductionism; T. Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic...”, 220, sees in *The Meaning and End of Religion* a “pietistic conception of religion as faith that is essentially individual and otherworldly”; for A. M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions...”, 69, the book represents “a kind of intellectual Protestant imperialism”; likewise, Timothy Fitzgerald, “Playing Language Games and Performing Rituals: Religious Studies as Ideological State Apparatus”, *Method*

tion “religion” (as well as other general labels, such as “Christianity”, “Buddhism”, or “Hinduism”) throughout history and comes to the conclusion that these terms went through some rather radical semantic changes. Originally, the term “religion” denoted inner faith, but later became a somewhat sterile external reification of the phenomenon itself in what Smith calls “cumulative tradition”. The consequences of this historical analysis are clear – the term “religion” is not only ambiguous, but often misleading.<sup>39</sup> Using the language of Wittgenstein, the term means different things to different people depending on the particular language game they happen to be playing.

This line of thought gained a large following during the second half of the twentieth century, up to a point where the essentialist definitions of religion are now deemed to be untenable by a large majority of scholars and definitions making use of the concepts of “family resemblances”, “unbound categories” and “polythetic classes” abound,<sup>40</sup> often complemented with attempts to compile specific lists of “family resemblance

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*and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15/3, 2003, 209-254: 240, notes that “much of the book reads as a Protestant manifesto for a world theology”.

- 39 W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion...*, characterizes the term as “confusing”, “unnecessary”, “distorting” (50); “unnecessary”, “much less serviceable and legitimate than they once seemed” (121); “imprecise”, “liable to distort” (125).
- 40 For the rejection of the essentialist definition of religion see, for instance, Robin Horton, “A Definition of Religion, and Its Uses”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 90/2, 1960, 201-226: 211; M. Southwood, “Buddhism and the Definition...”, 371; Talal Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz”, *Man* (n. s.) 18/2, 1983, 237-259: 252; William Herbrechtsmeier, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32/1, 1993, 1-18: 15; A. M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions...”, 81; V. S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining...”, 148. The family resemblance approach to the definition of religion has been advocated by Robert McDermott, “The Religion Game: Some Family Resemblances”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38/4, 1970, 390-400: 390; A. M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions...”, 80; John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press 2004, 4; V. S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining...”, 149. W. R. Comstock, “Toward Open Definitions...”, 507-515, comes to a similar conclusion via an analysis of literary theory and postmodernism; according to him, the definition of religion should function as an “open text” which only approximately marks the starting point of the study. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press 1982, 1-8, provides a seminal introduction to polythetic classification in the field of religious studies.

networks” for “religion”.<sup>41</sup> Yet it is quite reasonable to inquire critically as to the mutual relation between particular items on the list of family resemblances or in a polythetic class, since it would seem that only the following two interpretations are possible: Either there is some connection between the items on the list, a special something which glues them together and imposes mutual compatibility and cohesion (if so, how is it different from an “essence”?); or there is no such connection and all the items within the polythetic class are randomly assigned, having no inner coherence (if so, the proponent of this thesis would be hard pressed to explain that a term like this can be effectively used by competent speakers of a particular natural language). Both interpretations have their defenders,<sup>42</sup> but the answer to this problem may not lie in epistemic, but in pragmatic considerations.

### 5. “Power-based” social constructionism of religion

I have termed the social constructionist approach to the definition of religion discussed in the preceding section “power-innocent” to differentiate it from an alternative approach that, on the one hand, shares some of the basic premises (especially the rejection of essentialism), but, on the other hand, is very different in one important respect. While for Wittgenstein the question of power relations lurking behind the semantics

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41 M. Southwood, “Buddhism and the Definition...”, 370-371, lists items such as godlike beings, sacred/profane dichotomy, salvation, ritual, faith-based beliefs, ethical code, mythology, oral or scriptural tradition, religious elite; James W. Dow, “A Scientific Definition of Religion” [online], <<http://www.anpere.net/2007/2.pdf>>, 19 February 2007 [21 August 2013], 8-9, mentions three basic behavioral modules, namely “a cognizer of unobservable agents”, “a sacred category classifier” and “public sacrifice”; C. Martin, “Delimiting Religion...”, 165, uses the list compiled by William Alston, which includes belief in supernatural beings, sacred/profane dichotomy, ritual, moral code, religious feelings, prayer, anthropocentric worldview and the like; James B. Harrod, “A Trans-Species Definition of Religion”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5/3, 2011, 327-353: 344, includes items such as worship, ceremony, numinous feelings, holiness, the sacred and sacrifice.

42 C. Martin, “Delimiting Religion...”, 165-166, differentiates between three competing approaches to the non-essentialist definition of religion: (1) a list of key properties, which are not necessary and sufficient; (2) the family resemblance approach described above; (3) a random collection of disconnected items, which Martin terms “grab-bag use” and argues that contemporary use of the term “religion”, within the context of our language game, corresponds to this last interpretation. J. B. Harrod, “A Trans-Species Definition...”, 346-347, on the other hand, thinks that there is a well definable inner structure and complementarity within the different items of the polythetic class, which is “more than an ad hoc list”, since “components appear to be governed by an internal logic of recombinations”. Harrod’s own attempt at an inter-species definition of religion is, in my opinion, unconvincing.

of natural languages simply does not arise, for the “power-based” strain of the social constructionist approach to the definition of religion, the question of power distribution is clearly the central issue. As with the other approaches discussed above, “power-based” social constructionism also has important philosophical predecessors. One of them is undisputedly Friedrich Nietzsche, since the concept of power (or will to power) is omnipresent in his late writings.<sup>43</sup> In the twentieth century, this line of thought was further developed especially in the French postmodernist cultural milieu and is strongly connected with the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>44</sup>

The central thought of this vein of social constructionism is best expressed in the arbitrariness of classification, articulated simply and eloquently in the discussion of the categorization of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia related by Borges and cited in Foucault’s landmark publication *The Order of Things* from 1966.<sup>45</sup> Classifications and associated thought patterns, lying largely outside of our conscious evaluation, which are culture-specific and prone to diachronic change, constitute the “cultural *a priori*” which Foucault termed “episteme”. Yet, unlike Wittgenstein, who, drawing on Augustine, sketches in the very first paragraph of the *Philosophical Investigations* the idyllic way of the transfer of meaning from one generation to another,<sup>46</sup> Foucault identifies an intimate connection between the constitution of knowledge and the distribution of power, which permeates all his subsequent work. To take just one instructive example, in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault shows how the deep changes in the concept of “madness” from the renaissance to the seventeenth century are promoted for largely pragmatic, not epistemic, reasons, in or-

43 In his *Zarathustra*, the concept of the “will to power” is already present in full, accounting for what different nations and cultures accept as values: “A table of values hangs over every people. Look, it is the table of its overcomings; look, it is the voice of its will to power.” (Giorgio Colli – Mazzino Montinari [eds.], *Friedrich Nietzsche: Kritische Studienausgabe* IV, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 74.) In later writings, the descriptive concept becomes normative, for instance, in *Antichrist*, Nietzsche writes: “What is good? – Everything that increases the feeling of power, the will to power, the power itself in humans [Menschen]. What is bad? Everything that stems from weakness.” (G. Colli – M. Montinari (eds.), *Friedrich Nietzsche: Kritische Studienausgabe* IV..., 170.)

44 Andy Lock – Tom Strong, *Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, 245, note that the work of Nietzsche has proved to be an important influence for Foucault and the “attraction was to Nietzsche’s view of history not as a process that unfolds in a rational, progressive way, developing ever higher forms of reason, but through the exercise of power”.

45 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard 1966, 7-11.

46 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations...*, § 1. It is worth noting that indexes to this work do not even mention the word “power”.

der to isolate the irrational element from self-proclaimed rational society. Conceptual change, in a mutually reinforcing fashion, goes hand in hand with the practice of what Foucault termed “internment”, which, being an “institutional creation specific to the seventeenth century” and therefore clearly culture-specific and relative to the classical age,<sup>47</sup> serves the powers that be to collect and segregate elements contrary to the ideals of the society. Pierre Bourdieu expressed the essence of this approach by a simple slogan: “No more innocent words.”<sup>48</sup> Language games are emphatically not games, but battles and wars where words are used as weapons to secure power and domination.

Turning to “power-based” social constructionism in the study of religion, this theoretical approach finds its “power-innocent” counterpart deficient in two different ways. Firstly, as we have already seen, it could be objected that the use of the term “religion” under the premises of a language game approach could result in a situation where anything and everything could be labeled as “religion”,<sup>49</sup> depending on whether there is a connecting feature in between various family resemblances. If there is such a feature – John Hick, for instance, identifies it as “ultimate concern” –,<sup>50</sup> it is not immediately clear in which sense this approach is different from an essentialist definition. Yet if we rule out the common denominator of the set of family resemblances and settle with the “grab-bag” use, where particular items are unconnected, bearing no relation one to another, then the definition itself becomes so vague that it is probably not worth having in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

Yet a more urgent objection to “power-based” social constructionism is this: It is possible to agree with Cantwell Smith, for instance, that the term “religion” does not adequately describe the phenomenon itself, yet “power-innocent” social constructionism and its naïve language games miss the crucial part of the equation, namely the connection of name-giving with power distribution. This view is most eloquently voiced with respect to the

47 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris: Gallimard 1972, 108.

48 Pierre Bourdieu, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2001, 64.

49 T. Fitzgerald, “Playing Language Games...”, 228. Later on (*ibid.*, 250), Fitzgerald even argues that the conception of “language games” is in itself an ideology, as has been the imperialistic Western essentialist concept of religion. Elsewhere in the same paper (*ibid.*, 230), he argues that “if ‘religion’ can be everything, it is nothing at all” – yet if this is true, does the same thesis not hold for ideology? Because it surely seems that for Fitzgerald, everything is ideologically coloured and there are no such things as “pure facts”, only facts in relation to a theory, which is itself motivated mostly by practical (political, ideological), not epistemological needs.

50 J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion...*, 4. W. R. Comstock, “Toward Open Definitions...”, 507, correctly points out that “ultimate concern” can be “everything from hedonism to political fanaticism”.

51 T. Fitzgerald, “Religion, Philosophy...”, 216.



study of religion by Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald, and with respect to the phenomenon of religion itself by the late Gary Lease, although it could be argued that the study of religion is merely mirroring discursive practices of its object of study, since “scholars of religion are handmaids to what we can only understand as the self-evidently beneficial, universalizing power of religion and religious experiences”.<sup>52</sup>

Under this interpretation, the line between religion and the study of religion is blurred, since both are understood as systems designed to safeguard a particular network of power structures. Fitzgerald notes that “language is not simply a natural free-flowing system that spontaneously erupts into new usages”; quite to the contrary, “uses of language are connected to power and control”,<sup>53</sup> McCutcheon demonstrated in his discussion of *sui generis* approaches to religion, one of the most prominent theoretical and methodological systems in the twentieth century study of religion, that “such methods and theories are entrenched in unrecognized issues of discursive demarcation, power, and control”;<sup>54</sup> finally, for Lease, religion itself is a “political manifestation” of the distribution of power, an “imperialistic totalitarianism” which stretches the world onto the rack of conceptual schemata created solely for the purposes of imprisonment and control:

In both the short and the long run, religions are human constructions, systematic series of stories about humans and the chaos surrounding them. ... These fabrications provide straightjackets into which people should/must place their lives: they enslave. Religions thus become the most finely tuned examples of power structures, patterns of force which control human lives and dictate how they are to be conducted. Make no mistake about it: religions are about power, about power to be given you and about the power which controls you.<sup>55</sup>

“There is no religion”, contends Lease,<sup>56</sup> only power structures that manipulate the contents of the term itself to their own idiosyncratic benefits. And the study of religions, as it is habitually conducted, is probably

52 R. T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion...*, 183.

53 T. Fitzgerald, “Playing Language Games...”, 217. This translates directly to the institutional study of religions, where the power structures operate analogically to the religions themselves. For instance, Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 19, notes that “ecumenical theology in the form of phenomenology has significant and de facto institutional control over the meaning of the category religion”.

54 R. T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion...*, 191.

55 Gary Lease, “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture: Strategies for Surviving Dissolution”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21/2, 2009, 113-138: 132.

56 *Ibid.*, 130.

nothing more than the projection of the same power structures and ideological propaganda under the veil of academic *gravitas*.

Given the difference between “power-innocent” and “power-based” social constructionism, a cognitive definition of religion may be interpreted as responding to two quite distinct claims: First, against both modes of social constructionism, the CSR shows that the category of “religion” is not completely arbitrary because its *definiens*, the concept of minimally counter-intuitive agents, is fundamentally constrained by our evolved mental architecture, and therefore not “socially constructed” in the postmodernist sense of the term; second, with respect to the second mode of social constructionism, the CSR suggests that negative consequences of the relationship between religion, the study of religion, and power structures can be, if not completely avoided, then at least significantly minimized by strict adherence to methodological principles based on the empirical testability of hypotheses.<sup>57</sup>

## 6. Cognitive definition of religion

To sum up, in order for the definition of religion by the CSR to contend successfully in the current definitional discourse, it has to address the following issues: (1) In what sense is the definition of religion endorsed by the CSR – self-proclaimed to be “one of the most exciting developments in the study of religion during the past fifteen years”<sup>58</sup> –, different from Tylor’s definition of religion proposed almost 150 years ago? (2) Given the similarities with Tylor’s definition, how does the CSR respond to the challenge raised by Durkheim and his followers, namely that it seems that there are traditions we would pre-theoretically call religious, yet apparently do not entertain the concept of spiritual or supernatural beings? (3) Since the CSR definition is, in an important sense, universalistic (some would even call it essentialist), it needs to be shown that the social constructionist approach to religious phenomena is at the very least incomplete in non-trivial aspects, or that it is simply mistaken. (4) The CSR needs to answer the claim of the “power-based” strain of social construc-

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57 Jakub Havlíček, “Existuje v Japonsku náboženství? Kategorie náboženství a postmoderní kritika v sociálních vědách”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 21/2, 2013, 163-188, shows that the postmodernist critique of any definition of “religion” as inadequate and/or ideological is the logical outcome of a more general tendency of postmodernism and social constructionism, namely to deny science preferential status in the quest for generating knowledge.

58 Armin W. Geertz, “Cognitive Approaches to the Study of Religion”, in: Peter Antes – Armin W. Geertz – Randi R. Warne (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion II: Textual, Comparative, Sociological and Cognitive Approaches*, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008, 347-399: 347.

tionism that the foundation of religion is the management and distribution of power. I believe that all of these questions can be answered by scrutinizing more closely the basic theoretical and philosophical assumptions of the cognitive approach to religion.

(1) It has been shown that the philosophical forefathers of the essentialist definition of religion form part of a long tradition going all the way back to Plato; in the domain of non-essentialist definitions, “power-innocent” social constructionism is closely related to the work of late Ludwig Wittgenstein, while “power-based” social constructionism is connected with Nietzsche’s work and the later efforts of French postmodernism and post-structuralism. With respect to the cognitive approach, a case could be made for the seminal influence of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the well-recognized influence of Noam Chomsky’s work.

Kant’s philosophy can best be seen as an attempt to make peace between continental rationalists, who advocated the existence of innate ideas, and insular empiricists, who proposed the blank slate theory of the human mind.<sup>59</sup> Kant acknowledges the existence of innate principles according to which we generate experiential contents; they are, however, neither Platonic absolutes nor mere culturally determined Humean habits, but stand somewhere “in between”. They are general or universal in a certain sense, since it is supposed that every neurologically healthy member of our species possesses them (in Kant’s philosophy, they are *rules*; for the cognitive approach, they are better thought of as statistically relevant *propensities*), yet they are not absolute, but applicable only to the experiential content they help to generate. For Kant, the central question of the *Critique of the Pure Reason* is this: How are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible?<sup>60</sup> How can something be at the same time non-trivial and knowable *a priori* (that is, before any experience)? The answer to this question is, in my opinion, one and the same for both Kant and the cognitive approach: If we assume an active, constitutive, and formative role for our minds with respect to the generation of experience, it is quite possible that something can be both non-trivial and *a priori* knowable, namely the categorical framework our minds impose on the objects of our senses and

59 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975, 48-103, spends considerable time and effort (in fact, the whole of Book I of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) to pulverize any glimpse of the existence of innate ideas. The myth of the mind as a “blank slate” is still going strong in the twenty-first century – see, for instance, an overview of the problem by Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, New York: Penguin 2002.

60 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Jens Timmermann, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 1998, B XIX.

thoughts. The best explanation, which comprises only two sentences in the German original, is provided by Kant himself:

If intuition [*Anschauung*] must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition [*Anschauungsvermögen*], I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility. Since I cannot rest in these intuitions if they are to become known, but must relate them as representations to something as their object, and determine this latter through them, either I must assume that the *concepts*, by means of which I obtain this determination, conform to the object, or else I assume that the objects, or what is the same thing, that the experience in which alone, as given objects, they can be known, conform to the concepts. In the former case, I am again in the same perplexity as to how I can know anything *a priori* in regard to the objects. In the latter case the outlook is more hopeful. For experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding [*Verstand*]; and understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being *a priori*. They find expression in *a priori* concepts to which all objects of experience necessarily conform, and with which they must agree.<sup>61</sup>

What Kant did on a general level in philosophy, Chomsky did in particular for linguistics.<sup>62</sup> For Chomsky, language is simply too complex to be explained properly by invoking the idea of the mind as a passive receptacle of the contents of experience operating by “associative learning”. On the contrary, if we want to understand language acquisition, we have to postulate the existence of the “language faculty, which we understand to be some array of cognitive traits and capabilities, a particular component of the human mind/brain.”<sup>63</sup> What Kant did not know, and Chomsky did not care too much about, yet what must be dealt with in order to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the CSR is the answer to the question about the origins of the architecture of the brain and its various subsystems, which is provided by evolutionary psychology and has been forcefully articulated in a manifesto penned by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby in the introduction to their influential collection of essays aptly

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61 I. Kant, *Kritik...*, B XVII-XVIII. English translation is that of Norman Kemp Smith, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Macmillan 1929, 22-23.

62 Chomsky showed that behaviorist premises about the nature of acquisition of natural languages are untenable, see Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, Berlin – New York: Mouton de Gruyter 2002 (first edition 1957). *Syntactic Structures* were hailed as “the snowball which began the avalanche of the modern ‘cognitive revolution’” (David W. Lightfoot, “Introduction”, in: Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, Berlin – New York: Mouton de Gruyter 2002, v).

63 Noam Chomsky, *The Minimalist Program*, Cambridge – London: The MIT Press 1995, 14. The CSR is reluctant to postulate a separate “religious module”: as Todd Tremplin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, 74, notes, “no special domain for religious thought need be postulated”.

entitled *The Adapted Mind* (edited jointly with Jerome Barkow). Cosmides and Tooby are in complete agreement with both Kant and Chomsky, when they claim that “[a]ll humans tend to impose on the world a common encompassing conceptual organization, made possible by universal mechanisms operating on the recurrent features of human life”,<sup>64</sup> but provide a rationale for the existence of the specialized automated systems that play a constitutive role in the creation of knowledge and experience: Domain-specific inference systems or modules are adaptations selected for by natural selection throughout the course of human evolution.<sup>65</sup> These modules generate automatically what have been called “cross-cultural universals”,<sup>66</sup> representations that are automatically generated in neurologically healthy humans. Thus a universalistic bent already present in Tylor’s definition is vindicated and explained by the conceptual framework that originated in broad strokes in Kant’s philosophy and gained momentum thanks to recent advances in the cognitive sciences, launched by Chomsky’s ground-breaking work in linguistics in the late fifties.<sup>67</sup>

It has to be noted that the modular approach to the human mind, characterized by the triplet of domain specificity, information encapsulation, and localization of function,<sup>68</sup> introduced in linguistics by Chomsky and further expanded by Cosmides and Tooby to the “massive modularity” thesis, has come under severe criticism, ranging from “a common aca-

64 Leda Cosmides – John Tooby, “The Psychological Foundations of Culture”, in: Jerome H. Barkow – Leda Cosmides – John Tooby (eds.), *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, 19–136: 91. Both authors apparently recognize the connection to Kant’s philosophical views, since they term this approach “evolutionary Kantian position” (*ibid.*, 70).

65 It must be noted that most of the scholars working in the cognitive tradition do not consider religious ideas to be necessarily adaptive. It is more likely that they are only by-products or “spandrels”. S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust...*, 264, concludes that “religions are not adaptations and they have no evolutionary functions as such”.

66 Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994, 111. Given the origin of these representations, one could also speak about “evolutionary universals”, yet the term has been taken by Talcott Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals in Society”, *American Sociological Review* 29/3, 1964, 339–357: 339, to denote “any organizational development sufficiently important to further evolution that, rather than emerging only once, it is likely to be ‘hit upon’ by various systems operating under different conditions”.

67 S. J. Preus, *Explaining Religion...*, 138, notes that Tylor was “impressed by the unity of humankind” and that the very “validity of the comparative method for establishing developmental sequences depended on the essential sameness of the human capacity and the human condition”. In a similar manner, Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion*, Malden: Blackwell 2006, 112, argues that for Tylor, “[h]uman nature was something fundamentally universal, constant, and invariant”.

68 Michael S. Gazzaniga – Richard B. Ivry – George R. Mangun, *Cognitive Neuroscience: The Biology of the Mind*, New York – London: W. W. Norton 2009, 398.

demic parody of Chomsky ... proposing innate modules for bicycling, matching ties with shirts, rebuilding carburetors, and so on”,<sup>69</sup> to more serious considerations of the limits of massive modularity.<sup>70</sup> Compelling alternatives have been put forward as early as 1996, when Steven Mithen proposed a three-stage evolution of the human mind, where the evolutionarily oldest general-purpose learning mechanism first undergoes domain specialization, followed by the integration of different domains and the emergence of “cognitive fluidity”, which seems to provide for a reasonable compromise between modularity and interactivity.<sup>71</sup> Further advancements in neurocognitive research will undoubtedly yield new discoveries which will further improve our knowledge of the cognitive processes gauging more closely the number of modules, the extent of their function, and their possible integration, yet it seems clear that – contrary to the reigning presuppositions of the larger part of the twentieth century –, the structure of the mind matters. As Joseph LeDoux puts it, “the brain does indeed learn different things using different systems ..., which is consistent with the nativist view of innate learning modules and inconsistent with the behaviorist notion of a universal learning function”.<sup>72</sup>

(2) The cognitive approach, in my opinion, has succeeded in a reconceptualization of the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy by greatly increasing the accuracy of the original term in question, “spiritual beings”; in a later modification of Tylor’s definition by Melford Spiro, “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings”.<sup>73</sup> It has been pointed out numerous times, and rightly so, that terms such as “spiritual”, “supernatural” or “superhuman” are hope-

69 Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: Harper Perennial 1995, 436.

70 Jerry Fodor, who popularized the term “modularity” in his *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology*, Cambridge: The MIT Press 1983, concludes that “there are good reasons to doubt that MM is true: Taken literally, it verges on incoherence. Taken liberally, it lacks empirical plausibility” (Jerry Fodor, *The Mind Doesn’t Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology*, Cambridge: The MIT Press 2000, 55). More constructive criticism can be found in Kim Sterelny, *Thought in a Hostile World: The Evolution of Human Cognition*, Malden – Oxford: Blackwell 2003, 177–210. Sterelny argues that although the modular theory of language in particular might be essentially sound, it should not pass as a blueprint for other presupposed mental modules.

71 Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, London: Phoenix 1998, 65–78.

72 Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, New York: Penguin 2002, 86.

73 Melford E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation”, in: Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, New York: Praeger 1966, 85–126: 96.

lessly vague and ambiguous.<sup>74</sup> The CSR solves this problem by the introduction of the concept of “counter-intuitive agents”, where the central notion of “counter-intuitiveness” is well-defined in terms of “folk theories” of physics, biology and psychology firmly grounded in evolutionary psychology. The practical application of this concept with respect to Buddhism has been taken up by Ilkka Pyysiäinen. Using the conceptual background of the CSR, the Finnish scholar has been able to present a plausible case for Buddhism as a religion containing a large number of counter-intuitive agents; in his own words, “Buddha and the buddhas most clearly belong to the category of counter-intuitive beings, and ... Buddhism thus need not be problematic with regard to a global concept of religion”.<sup>75</sup> Reformulated in this way, Buddhism is no longer the magic bullet argument that Durkheim once took it for.

(3) Varieties of social constructionism therefore seem to be mistaken in the belief that essentialist definitions of religion are defective in principle. The concept of (minimally) counter-intuitive agents used by the CSR could be viewed as a cross-cultural universal,<sup>76</sup> well-tailored for our cognitive systems in being “weird” enough to matter for memory recall and, by extension, cultural transmission, yet not “too weird” to allow for rich inference potential. In a sense, the CSR is set to replace the false dichotomy of naïve essentialism on the one hand and free-for-all social constructionism on the other with a synthetic approach recognizing relatively stable sets of constraints, which are generated by our cognitive architecture designed during the evolutionary history of our species, as well as deep intercultural variation among religious concepts, beliefs and practices.

74 R. Horton, “A Definition of Religion...”, 204; yet he is largely in agreement with the definition proposed by Tylor. M. Southwood, “Buddhism and the Definition...”, 367, considers any theistic definition to be “too superficial”; M. L. Wax, “Religion as Universal...”, 10, rejects the dichotomy of “natural” and “supernatural” as a Western intellectual construction dependent on the idiosyncratic development of scientific knowledge (and therefore not applicable to cultures with different paths of sociocultural evolution); according to W. Herbrechtsmeier, “Buddhism and the Definition...”, 5, “the category ‘superhuman’ is inherently flawed and should be abandoned”; A. M. McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions...”, 65, considers the term “supernatural” to be “a very ambiguous concept”.

75 Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Buddhism, Religion, and the Concept of ‘God’”, *Numen* 50, 2003, 147-171: 163. See also a more elaborate discussion of Buddhist supernatural agents in Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods, and Buddhas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009, 137-172, which, in addition to buddhas, also draws attention to other counter-intuitive beings, such as spirits (*yakha*), giants (*asura*) or gods (*devas*).

76 For an illuminating discussion of the term “universal” and its different meanings see Ara Norenzayan – Steven J. Heine, “Psychological Universals: What Are They and How Can We Know?”, *Psychological Bulletin* 131/5, 2005, 763-784.

(4) Concerning “power-based” social constructionism in particular, the response of the CSR is different with respect to the relation of power and religion itself and the relation of power and the study of religion.

Concerning the latter, Ivan Strenski is probably right in noting that “[i]t is frankly ludicrous to imply that the academic study of religion, so meager in its resources, has hegemonically imposed a concept of ‘religion’ on the wretched of the earth, as some of our comrades believe”.<sup>77</sup> This is not to contest the claim that religious studies can, and often are, used for political purposes. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the CSR (as opposed to, say, *sui generis* approaches to religion) minimizes the risk of potentially unwanted misuse of the academic study of religion for political ends via the adoption of a proper scientific methodology, including empirical testing, experimentation, and the rejection of inherently flawed analytic categories (such as “sacred”) and reformulation of potentially ambiguous ones (“gods” or “supernatural beings”).

Concerning the relation of power and religion itself, the CSR does not deny the interrelation of power and religion,<sup>78</sup> but does not place it in the focus of its scientific endeavours either. Further, an argument could be made for the chronological primacy of religious concepts free from power relations in society. These concepts do not seem to be purposefully invented to cement power relations desirable for their inventors.<sup>79</sup> Rather, they are generated naturally as by-products of the architecture of the human brain, with the possibility of political (mis)use as an optional, secondary development. Somewhat simplistically, the difference between “power-based” social constructionism and the CSR could be viewed as a difference in accent demonstrated via the distinction of two interconnected, yet in many respects autonomous systems of thought. The first system, evolutionarily older, operating quickly and automatically on the basis of evolved cognitive modules, generates inferences and causal relations, biased to believing and confirming (as opposed to critically examining). The second system, evolutionarily younger, operating slowly and consciously,

77 Ivan Strenski, “Religion, Power, and Final Foucault”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66/2, 1998, 345-367: 358.

78 For instance, P. Boyer, *Religion Explained...*, 276, notes that “[s]ince the services of literate religious groups are dispensable, the religious schools that do not yield some measure of political leverage are very likely to end up as marginal sects, a process that has happened repeatedly in history”.

79 This line of thought, although mistaken, has an extremely long history, ranging back to the sophist Critias, according to whom gods were invented by “some wise gentleman” to act as Orwellian 1984-style divine policemen in order to enforce laws, since the permanent control of all individuals is a practical impossibility, see Hermann Diels – Walter Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Zürich: Weidmann 2004, 88 B 25.



houses executive functions and accounts for deliberate action and thought.<sup>80</sup> The focus of the CSR lies with the first system because of its instrumental role in the generation of representations which seem to be a *conditio sine qua non* for any subsequent development of the beliefs and practices we term “religious”. The second system is then responsible for the conscious manipulation of religious concepts (e.g., to fulfill political needs or strengthen the existing or desired power distribution). As Todd Tremlin aptly points out, “if a ubiquity of gods is indeed the case, then it would seem that ... gods are in fact foundational and it is *religion* that is instrumental”.<sup>81</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

I have shown that (1) in spite of the cautionary tone of scholars affiliated with the CSR, it is possible to reconstruct a “cognitive definition of religion”. (2) Owing to paradigmatic theoretical changes, this cognitive definition of religion solves the Tylor–Durkheim dichotomy by replacing the hopelessly ambiguous concept of “spiritual”, “superhuman” or “supernatural” beings within the empirically testable concept of counter-intuitiveness. (3) The theoretical framework of the cognitive approach, especially the concept of cross-cultural species-specific universals generated naturally by the architecture of the human mind, answers the objections of social constructionism against any form of “essentialism”. (4) While the CSR acknowledges that power relations might play a significant role in many religions, an explanatory theory of religion based solely on power relations is at best incomplete, since it is unlikely to explain adequately the origin of religious concepts.

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80 In the description of the two systems, I draw largely on Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2011, 19-105, especially the summarizing table on page 105. For discussion of the dual processing of religious concepts, see Todd Tremlin, “Divergent Religion: A Dual-Process Model of Religious Thought, Behavior, and Morphology”, in: Harvey Whitehouse – Robert N. McCauley (eds.), *Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 2005, 69-83.

81 T. Tremlin, *Minds and Gods...*, 144.



## SUMMARY

**Has the Cognitive Science of Religion (Re)defined “Religion”?**

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the stance of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) with respect to the problem of the definition of religion. Firstly, I defend the necessity of an approximate definition of religion due to the fact that (a) definitions are micro-theories and (b) there is considerable social demand for a comprehensive definition of religion because of the inclusion of the concept in the majority of contemporary legal systems. Secondly, I present a representative sample of statements about the nature of religion put forward by scholars working within the cognitive tradition, which reveals considerable convergence on what the CSR thinks religion is about and justifies the concept of a “cognitive definition of religion”. Thirdly, in a brief historical sketch, I try to identify two opposite tendencies in historical attempts at defining religion and their respective philosophical backgrounds: Essentialist definitions perpetuate the venerable Western tradition harking back to Plato’s *Euthyphro*, while recent non-essentialist definitions draw on the work of late Wittgenstein (in what I term “power-innocent” social constructionism) and Nietzsche, Foucault and Bourdieu (in what I term “power-based” social constructionism), respectively. Lastly, against the background of an essentialist vs. non-essentialist dialectic, I consider the definition of religion provided by the CSR, which, while *prima facie* almost indistinguishable from Tylor’s doctrine of animism, is based philosophically on Kant and Chomsky (and therefore at odds with the prevalent practice of social constructionism) and capable of providing much more cogent justification for a universalistic approach to religion than any of its essentialist predecessors.

**Keywords:** cognitive science of religion; definition of religion; cognitive revolution; essentialism; nominalism; realism; language games; family resemblances; social constructionism.

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