

Toward a Volitional Definition of Religion

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This article advocates for the production of stipulative definitions of religion, a type of nominal definition that articulates new ways of applying a word to a thing. I propose that scholars look to sites where phenomena historically have been labeled “religion” on lexical or real understandings of the term, this to query how religious agents there *chose*, implicitly or explicitly, to systematize thought, speech, emotion, and action. Such self-consciously ordered systems, I argue, may properly be labeled “religion.” Next, I apply this method to premodern South Asia, suggesting “religion” refers to the second-order structuring there that links normative social relations to normative states of subjectivity, any innovation in the one demanding innovation in the other. I conclude by inviting other efforts at stipulative definition, all with an eye toward an inductive approach, allowing that the myriad locations of religion present mutually distinguishable systems that may all properly be so labeled.

If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only

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the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experience and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.¹

—Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, xi; emphasis his)

INTRODUCTION

EFFORTS to define religion have evidently gone out of style in recent years, and a gamut of criticism faces one wishing formally to specify the meaning of the term. It is an enterprise variously dismissed as unnecessary,² useless,³ or impossible.⁴ Even when engaged, the endeavor has reached something of an impasse; definitions supportive of either “substantivist” or “culturalist” explanations of religion have been deemed problematic,⁵ the former for offering “ontological” understandings of

¹Note that, in “*there is no data for religion*,” because the verb is singular Smith should have referred to a “datum” (singular).

²Andrew M. McKinnon (2002), for example, argues that a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” renders sufficiently clear the referent of the term, even as there is no scholarly agreement precisely as to what it connotes. Religion, he argues, “denotes a number of traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.” (McKinnon 2002, 79). He further argues that no “essence” of religion is imputed in the use of the term (2002, 67). Note however that Timothy Fitzgerald (1996) (cited but not exhaustively rebutted by McKinnon) argued against a very similar position.

³See, for example, Gombrich (1996, 1–2): “Much that has been said and written in the field of comparative religion is, alas, a waste of time, because it has been concerned with a search for ‘correct’ definitions. To start with there has been endless argument over the definition of religion itself. The argument is bound to be endless, because the problem is a pseudo-problem and has no ‘correct’ solution. A certain definition may serve certain purposes, and hence be justified in that context, but there is no reason why others with different purposes should adopt it.” (Emphasis is mine.)

⁴On this view, the endeavor to define or speak of religion *in general*—as opposed to speaking about individual traditions such as Hinduism (with all the difficulties attendant with the term), Islam, or Christianity—is inherently flawed for the well-known fact that the term is shaped by its development in the intellectual and cultural history of the West. Thus, Fitzgerald (1997), for example, recommends the term be jettisoned altogether. Cf. Asad 1993, 27–54, esp. 30; Fitzgerald 1996. On the development of the term “religion” in the West, see J. Z. Smith 1998; Dubuisson 2003.

⁵On the nomenclature of the substantivist-culturalist binary, see footnote 17 below.

religion that privilege something indefinable and for unspecified reasons,⁶ the latter, often associated with functionalist definitions, suffering from an imprecision grounded in a failure to identify what differentiates religion from other, non-religious cultural phenomena. “Thus, ironically,” Arnal sums up the conundrum, “it is the *absence* of the very feature whose (indefinable and question-begging) *presence* is ruinous for substantivist definitions that turns out to be the central weakness of culturalist or functionalist definitions” (Arnal 2000, 28).

With the present article I would like to propose an approach to definition that is rooted not in the endeavor to state definitively what religion truly is but to clarify how we might use the term to refer to things in the world. This is to suggest both that extant substantivist and culturalist definitions have generally taken up what the logicians refer to as a real definitional purpose and that departing from this approach to pursue the more modest, nominal purpose of definition may prove more useful given the evident definitional impasse facing the study of religion.

More specifically, I propose to abandon not only real definitional pursuits but also one form of nominal definition that scholars have engaged extensively to date, namely, lexical definition, this in favor of what the logicians refer to as stipulative definition. Lexical definitions are intended to specify the meaning of “religion” in its common sense. Yet the meaning of the term in this sense has met with justifiable criticism for the fact that it imports with it presuppositions elaborated in and by its conceptual genealogy in the historical, intellectual, political, geographic, and cultural contexts of the Modern West. The stipulative form of nominal definition, by contrast, explicitly seeks to articulate novel ways of using a term that owe no conceptual debt to the term’s lexical meaning.

In support of this alternative approach I propose that J. Z. Smith was right when he noted that humanity has had its “entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion.” For in a host of cultural contexts that predate the modern development of the meaning and use of the term, humans developed and engaged various habits of speech, thought, emotional expression, and action that while *today* identified with “religion” were once not thus conceptually organized.⁷

The method I propose is to privilege the phenomena in their original contexts as much as possible without regard for the conceptual formations

⁶William E. Arnal (2000, 27) refers to an “ontological” basis for such definitions. See the same for the claim that such definitions privilege something indefinable for unspecified reasons. Cf. Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 24–25.

⁷This phenomenon was recently examined in some detail in Nongbri 2013.

defined by “religion” in its modern sense(s). I propose to eschew, that is, the predominantly *deductive* approaches to definition that have generally been deployed to date. Such deductive approaches have sought either to adjust the formal expression of the concept of religion to fit with the phenomena that the common sense of the term may intuitively be taken to denote (lexical definition), or they have sought reductively to define the essential nature of religion (on whatever basis, be it grounded in theology or one or another of the disciplines such as psychology or sociology), subsequently explaining *all* the various phenomena of numerous and varying cultural contexts exclusively on those terms (real definition).

The present approach is intended to be incremental in that it seeks not to define religion “once and for all” but to elucidate discrete and novel conceptions thereof. It calls for the stipulation of *various* definitions of religion, each generalized from a particular context where the term has been and could be applied today. The hypothesis I intend to test is that one may profitably label phenomena that *predate* the modern conceptual elaboration of “religion” with the term, because something was “there” before being so named that may nevertheless profitably accept the label even despite the historical advent of the term only after the phenomena themselves. The premodern phenomena that we can designate as “religion” were, I contend, “socially dependent facts” variously conceived in myriad cultural contexts. More specifically, they were *systems* that self-consciously ordered thought, action, emotional habits, and social realities. Emphasis here is thus given to excavating the particular, self-consciously constructed models of social, intellectual, and cultural organization formed by religious agents themselves.

The test-case I offer is drawn from South Asia in its premodernity where, I argue, particular individuals whom we today would habitually label as religious agents intentionally articulated and deployed a cultural *system* that organized many of the phenomena today associated with the term. I wish to stipulate, that is, that “religion” refers to the very second-order thinking, the theoretical organization of cultural habits, conceived by these premodern agents. Religion so understood intimates that religious agents fashioned and articulated systems that called on individuals and societies to elaborate—to *choose* to identify and engage—particular structures that ordered social and intellectual institutions *in mutual relation* such that a particular normative understanding of the nature of subjectivity *demand*ed a concomitant normative understanding of the structure of social relations and *vice versa*. Choice or volition, that is, defined for them how one should and habitually would engage the various social and cultural phenomena to which we today apply the term religion.

The same may profitably be stipulated to define one sense of how one may conceive the concept and use the term more generally, moreover, because the activities of these particular agents may be found to have a more general distribution across cultures and historical periods.

In what follows, I proceed in four stages. First (in the section “Types, Purposes, and Consequences of Defining Religion”), I outline the several major purposes of definition as classified in Western logic and explain some common misconceptions around them. Here I wish both to establish the potential vibrancy for a mode of thinking about religion embodied by stipulative definitional endeavors and to chalk out the parameters for pursuing such a definitional mode. With this abstract understanding of definition in mind, I next consider the contours of what I stipulate we should define as religion, namely, the self-consciously ordered system(s) constructed by agents in South Asia’s premodernity. Finally, I generalize a model of religion therefrom and follow with concluding remarks.

TYPES, PURPOSES, AND CONSEQUENCES OF DEFINING RELIGION

The failure to distinguish all the time between the analysis of things and the nominal definition of words has been the cause of most of the common errors in the theory of definition. (Robinson [1950] 1962, 177)

Why stipulate? What do stipulative definitions offer that other definitional approaches fail to furnish? How could they lead to more thoughtful and useful engagements in the study of religion? I offer my answers to these questions in two stages. First, I suggest that stipulation has always been a part of thinking about religion. Yet—this is the second point—although it has created problems, stipulation can equally furnish a solution to said problems. This is so because it encourages and supports the kind of inductive thinking about religion that is most likely to produce progressively improved and nuanced understandings of the matter at hand. In other words, if a “science of religion” is to be possible, it is most likely to come with a stipulative definition and not with either real definitions (which are descriptively reductive) or lexical definitions that hew closely to the meaning of the term in its common sense. For, I will argue, stipulative definitions better cultivate and support provisional and inclusive understandings of religion, which are better suited to match the myriad and various data—the ordered systems of various cultural traditions—that may be counted as such.

Taking up the first of these points, first, I turn to Smith’s famed maxim found in the epigraph to this article, that “*there is no data for religion.*”

Although cited to the point of cliché, the definitional scope and significance of this maxim merit further examination, for it amounts to nothing more or less than the articulation of a clear position on defining religion, one that fully reflects the history of the formation of the term itself.

“Religion,” Smith pithily but clearly stated (again in the epigraph above), “is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” By this he meant *not* that a particular body of phenomena in human culture and activity was inexistent prior to the formulation of a second-order category named “religion” but rather that it is only in the last few centuries that humans have elected to apply the name “religion” to a body of *pre-existent* cultural forms and activities that were present in multiple cultural and geographic locations. “Religion” on his view is an indispensable category for the study of religion that may be deployed variously by scholars to define the same.⁸ It is the word “religion” more than the things out there in the world so named that concerned Smith. And the “act of second order reflective imagination” that made religion was an act (or, rather, series of acts) by which “western man” established a novel *relationship* between the word and the things to which they took it to refer. So much is an instance of nothing more or less than nominal definition.

Nominal definitions are of a comparatively modest purpose. They are “those in which a word, whose meaning is unknown or unclear, is defined in terms of some expression whose meaning is already known.”⁹ The logician Richard Robinson classes nominal definitions as either “word-word” or “word-thing” in form (Robinson [1950] 1962, 12–34 and *passim*; cf. Penner and Yonan 1972, 116), the former designating acts of correlating one symbol with another—defining the word “*chapeau*” with the word “hat,” for example—the latter the “correlating of a word to a thing” (Robinson [1950] 1962, 17). He further distinguishes two ways of correlating word and thing. One may seek either to define how it is that a certain group of people have used a particular word in a particular place and time, what he labels “lexical definition;”¹⁰ or one may seek to formulate and establish a new meaning for a word, a new correlation of word to thing—what Robinson labels “stipulative definition.”

⁸See J. Z. Smith 1998, 281–82: “‘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.”

⁹This is how Spiro (1966, 85) sums up the matter. Of it Richard Robinson summarily says, “The purpose of nominal definition is something to do with *nomina* or words or signs or symbols...roughly the purpose of nominal definition is to report or establish the meaning of a symbol” ([1950] 1962, 16).

¹⁰Lexical definition, Robinson says, is “that sort of word-thing definition in which we are explaining the actual way in which some actual word has been used by some actual persons” ([1950] 1962, 35).

‘Whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.’

Humpty Dumpty insisted that words were to mean what he chose that they should mean. He did not concern himself with any lexical inquiries, that is, with finding out what some set of people actually had meant by some word. He laid down what the word was to mean when he used it. That was stipulative definition. (Robinson [1950] 1962, 59)

Stipulative definitions seek not to tell us what something truly is or how a word has been used historically but rather to “introduce new symbols and meanings”¹¹ and in so doing to “influence attitudes,” what Irving Copi rightly counts among the fundamental purposes of definition.¹² Indeed, “The greatest good to be obtained by stipulative definitions . . . is the improvement of concepts or the creation of new concepts, which is the key to one of two or three locks on the door of successful science” (Robinson [1950] 1962, 68).

With these distinctions in mind, one may clearly infer that Smith’s preface to *Imagining Religion* sought to claim that over “the last few centuries” “western man” *stipulated* that the word “religion” denotes a particular set of human activities—namely, “imagin[ing] deities and modes of interaction with them.” We may add that, subsequent to this, it was the stipulated meanings of the term that acquired lexical significance in academic speech and common parlance alike. If there are problems with the meaning of religion in its lexical sense, they are the product of the history of stipulation that formed that common sense of the term. It is the process of stipulation that justifies Smith’s claim that “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” Indeed, the history of the development of the term, as Smith himself elsewhere chronicles, is nothing less than the development, in various ways and for various reasons, of novel relationships of the word “religion” to things in the world to which it was variously understood to refer.¹³

Yet, although stipulation defined the oft-problematic meaning of the term in its common sense, when properly engaged it offers a fresh avenue forward for the study of religion. The negative reasons for engaging stipulation anew boil down to the fact that scholars have pursued the other possible definitional purposes—real definition and lexical definition—in ways that have led to various conceptual misunderstandings,

¹¹This brief description is the paraphrase of Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan (1972, 116, *pace* I. M. Copi).

¹²See Copi 1964, 89, cited in Penner and Yonan 1972, 115.

¹³For his *présis* of the historical development of the term, see J. Z. Smith 1998.

misconceptions generally stemming from a false understanding of one exemplar or interpretation of religion as the singular, true, and invariable nature thereof. Put differently, scholars have often mistaken both lexical definition and stipulative definition for real definition. The positive reasons are just the opposite: stipulation alone, if self-consciously engaged, facilitates patterns of thinking that encourage novel, diverse, and plural understandings of religion, which, I argue, are not only desirable but necessary given the myriad forms of what may be so named. Before discussing the positive reasons for engaging stipulative definition, I here turn first to an elaboration of the negative reasons by considering in more detail the purposes of real definition and the lexical form of nominal definition as well as how they have been misused or misunderstood.

First is real definition. If nominal definition seeks to establish the meaning of a word or symbol, its counterpart in the binary of definitional purposes formulated in Western logic, real definition,¹⁴ seeks to make what “are conceived to be true statements about entities or things” (Spiro 1966, 86). Robinson describes real definitions as “thing-thing” in form (Robinson [1950] 1962, 18–19, 149–192; cf. Penner and Yonan 1972, 116), by which he means they seek, in various ways,¹⁵ to furnish true statements about the real nature of something out there in the world. Real definitions are formulated as statements of the kind that “the thing *x* is *yz*,” which is to say real definition is formulated by conceiving the *definiendum* to be an actual thing in the world, not the word used to symbolize it, the *definiens* (or statement that defines the *definiendum*) in turn being understood to express a truth about the nature or essence of the thing (i.e., the *definiendum*) in question, be it an entity that is of a natural kind (such as lightning or a frog) or a “socially dependent fact”¹⁶ (such as the notion that a particular person has been elected president or that it is not legal to drink alcohol before the age of eighteen or twenty-one). Nominal definition, by contrast, understands the *definiendum* to be a symbol, such as a word being defined, and it figures the *definiens* to be what is symbolized by it, whether another symbol (as in “word-word” definition) or an entity in the world (“word-thing” definition).

On these terms, we may again restate Smith’s argument by understanding it to claim that a real definition of religion is impossible, because “the archeological and textual record” clarifies that humans for

¹⁴See Robinson [1950] 1962, 18, 19, and 149–92. This binary distinction is also deployed and explained in Spiro 1966, 85–86 and in Penner and Yonan 1972, 116.

¹⁵See Robinson [1950] 1962, 152–92, esp. 189–90, where he identifies twelve types of activities “confused” with real definition.

¹⁶I here follow Kevin Schilbrack in referring to “socially dependent facts” (2010, 1118–19). Schilbrack in turn cites Searle 1995, 7–9 in doing so. See footnote 29.

centuries elaborated a host of religious ideas and activities prior to anyone developing the conception of an overarching, unifying, and generic category thereof. Scholars defining religion have very frequently conceived of their purposes as those of real definition, however. They have done so either implicitly or explicitly and self-consciously, regardless of whether the given definition was deployed to support a “theological” or a “naturalistic” explanation of religion.¹⁷ Simply, the majority of “substantive” and “culturalist” definitions offered to date have been presented as and understood to be real definitions.

Second is lexical definition, what was explained *in nuce*, above. A large proportion of recent efforts at defining “religion” have been devoted to lexical definition—to capturing the meaning of the term in its common sense. The most successful of these is probably that of Melford Spiro,¹⁸ who famously defined religion as “an institution consisting of culturally

¹⁷One might suspect that those who understand religion to be something essentially real—who offer “theological” or “substantivist” explanations of religion—would exclusively furnish real definitions thereof, whereas, conversely, those who understand religion to be a contingent, cultural phenomenon—who offer “naturalistic” or “reductionistic” (or “culturalist”) explanations of religion—would proffer only nominal definitions of the same. So much has proven *not* to be the case. Many scholars who maintain theological or substantivist views, as do Otto and Eliade, do indeed write real definitions that are conceived to be “true statements” about religion, this much is true. Religion as they define it is essentially real, not merely culturally formed; *and* their definitions mean to identify it definitively. See Otto [1917] 1923, 8; Eliade [1954] 2005, 17–21, also cited in Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 22. Yet, William James self-consciously writes a nominal definition based on a substantivist understanding of the experiences he places at the core of both his definition and the phenomena he defines as religion. He claims, that is, that although one may *arbitrarily* define religion in a number of ways, the phenomena he labels with the term religion—“the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”—are undoubtedly real (James [1902] 1958, 42).

Similarly, not every scholar who articulates a “naturalistic” or “reductionistic” (or, again to cite Arnal and McCutcheon’s parallel terminology, “culturalist”) conception of religion develops a nominal definition of the same. Emile Durkheim, for example—as Spiro 1966, 89 noted—proffers a real definition that explains the nature of religion *definitively* though naturalistically; he reduces religion to a function and product of social relations and nothing more. And Freud, though he never explicitly and concisely *defines* religion, similarly develops a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of religion that nevertheless claims to capture its real nature. Religion according to him is an illusion (for which see Freud [1927] 1961, *passim*. and, esp., 43–50, 71), or, as he says subsequently (Freud [1930] 1961, 32), is a mass delusion; he offers what may be counted a “thing-thing” description of a phenomenon that he understands to be thoroughly culturally grounded.

On the distinction between “theological” and “naturalistic” (the latter also labeled “reductionistic”) explanations of religion see Preus 1987, ix. For the parallel if not identical division between “substantivist” and “culturalist” understandings of religion see Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 17–30, esp. 24. Cf. McCutcheon 1997, *passim*, where he contrasts *sui generis* discourses on religion with naturalist ones. Finally, compare a similar binary of Aaron W. Hughes (2017), where phenomenological approaches to comparative religion are contrasted with historical ones.

¹⁸J. Z. Smith also notes the widespread acceptance of this definition (1998, 281). I add that the renowned theorist of religion Hans H. Penner echoes its formulation as follows: “Religion is a verbal and nonverbal structure of interaction with superhuman being(s)” (Penner 1989, 7).

patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro 1966, 96). Indeed, there can be little doubt that Spiro offers a greater precision in his formalism than those of the prior efforts on which his is evidently elaborated, for example E. B. Tylor's "belief in Spiritual Beings,"¹⁹ Robin Horton's "extension of social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society" (Horton 1960, 212), or Jack Goody's adaptation, with additions, of Tylor's "minimum definition."²⁰

Lexical definition presents with a certain efficiency by conforming to conventional language use, which furnishes it with an intuitive comprehensibility. Yet, although it was declared a definitional desideratum by Hans H. Penner and Edward Yonan in their influential methodological article, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?,"²¹ this presumed comprehensibility has been a source of many of the conceptual problems in the academic study of religion. In particular, I argue, it establishes an understanding of religion based in *a relationally-dependent form of subjectivity*, one of an agent standing in relation to or relationship with a superhuman or a divine, often in a posture of relative unknowing, thereby requiring acceptance of particular articles of faith or belief. Indeed, Spiro himself claims a universality of application for his definition out of a conviction that belief (in what is outside oneself and transcending the limits of the natural world) is ubiquitously present where the label of religion may properly be applied (Spiro 1966, 94):

To summarize, I would argue that the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or to harm man approaches universal distribution, and this belief—I would insist—is the core variable which ought to be designated by any definition of religion. Recently Horton (1960) and Goody (1962) have reached the same conclusion.²²

¹⁹Tylor [1865] 1874, 424: "The first requisite in a systematic study of the religions of the lower races is to lay down a rudimentary definition of religion. By requiring in this definition the belief in a supreme deity or of judgment after death, the adoration of idols or the practice of sacrifice, or other partially-diffused doctrines or rites, no doubt many tribes may be excluded from the category of religious. But such a narrow definition has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them. It seems best to fall back at once on this essential source, and simply to claim, as a minimum definition of Religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings."

²⁰This is not only Jack Goody's (1961, 157) characterization of Tylor's definition but also Tylor's own (cited at footnote 19), as is well known.

²¹In chalking out the "rules" that should govern definitional endeavors, Penner and Yonan state first of all that "the definiens should state the conventional connotation of the definiendum" (1972, 115; emphasis mine). They carve out an exception for stipulative definitions, but their emphasis, as I read it, is on the conventional connotation of the definiendum.

Cf. Horton 1960, 211: "First of all, we are concerned with a term which has a clear common usage in our own culture. To avoid confusion, therefore, any definition which we put forward as the basis of its use in anthropology should conform as closely as possible to the usage of common sense."

²²Note that the proper publication date for Goody's article is 1961, not 1962. The error in the block quotation is Spiro's.

The principle problem with this definition and others like it, I argue, is that however well such a definition might fit some cultural and religious contexts (e.g., it meshes well with many of the monotheistic traditions), not all admit of a concept of the subject and that subject's relation to what counts in "religion" in this manner. Indeed, it is precisely in accepting *as real* the *definiens* of a lexical definition such as Spiro's that one surrenders one's conception of religion to the culturally patterned meaning defined by its (Western) genealogy,²³ in which the term has been elaborated and deployed most frequently to establish hierarchies of religious traditions and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.²⁴

In thus mistaking lexical for real definition, one not only reduces the interpretive range of the phenomena being named, but consequently one also elaborates an understanding of the category that suffers in various ways from the problem of under-extension.²⁵ Lexical definition, if mistaken for real definition, suggests that *a particular* culturally formed understanding of religion may stand for *all* instances thereof, whenever and wherever they may be found. This is to make what I would label "the weak argument" for stipulative definition, then, on the grounds that one particular way of applying a word to a thing or set of things called "religion" cannot be taken by way of deduction to be the only way to do so, because the entities named admit of various forms, requiring various definitions.

The concerns with real definition, in turn, demand further attention and strike at precisely what it is one is engaging when defining the category in question. Consider the following. A real definition engaging what Samuel J. Preus calls the "deistic-theological strategy"²⁶ suggests that

²³I agree, that is, with scholars who suggest the term in its lexical sense patterns a conception of religion that freezes—essentializes—the phenomena it names, often for political reasons. See, for example, Asad 1993, 27–54; and Fitzgerald 1996, which should be read in contrast to McKinnon 2002. Cf. Schilbrack 2010, 1117.

²⁴J. Z. Smith maps and summarizes this history and summarizes his view of it as follows: "The most common form of classifying religions, found both in native categories and in scholarly literature, is dualistic and can be reduced, regardless of what differentium is employed, to 'theirs' and 'ours'" (1998, 276).

²⁵Arnal and Russell McCutcheon note that definitions such as Spiro's cannot account for animistic traditions that do not conceive of superhuman beings or the supernatural at all (2013, 24). Spiro, in turn, noted the difficulties that Buddhism presents to such definitions, though he, like Gombrich, concludes they are overstated (Spiro 1966, 93–94; Gombrich 1996, 2).

Arnal and McCutcheon (2013, 24) find lexical definitions such as Spiro's problematic for another reason: they replace one ill-defined term—"religion"—with another—viz., the "superhuman" (or the like). They therefore class Spiro's and those like it with other "substantivist" definitions. My own view is closer to that of J. Z. Smith, who suggests Spiro's definition "requires acceptance of a broad theory of cultural creation" (1998, 281).

²⁶The "deistic-theological" strategy, according to Preus, involves "incorporat[ing] the claims, values, and data from one's own religion (usually Christianity) into a wider, generic, or allegedly universal theological wisdom" (1987, 54).

any self-understanding of religious agents that does not accord with the terms of the real definition constitutes an error of conception on the part of such agents. Whatever they may think, say, or understand themselves to be doing, thinking, or feeling, they are, on this view, in fact responding to a particular reality that is explained by only one religious tradition. Real definitions that support naturalistic explanations of religion, in turn, are similarly problematic in their reductionism inasmuch as nothing in the self-understanding of the religious agents in question may be said to have any causal effect apart from structuring a symbolic order to which they might subscribe.²⁷ For these classes of real definition could only be apposite, could only be both descriptively reductive (to use Wayne Proudfoot's category) and true, if there were nothing in the emic self-understanding that could survive the reduction.²⁸ This, I will argue, is simply not the case.

I wish to claim that neither real definitions supporting a deistic-theological strategy nor those supportive of descriptively reductive, naturalistic explanations of religion are universally applicable. I do so on the basis of making what I will label "the strong argument" for stipulation. This is to say that, following Kevin Schilbrack, I wish to suggest that what "religion" names is not only varied but is *real* in the sense that the referents of the term should be understood to be socially dependent facts, albeit socially dependent facts ordered and structured in different ways in their various cultural, historical, political, geographic, linguistic, and economic contexts.²⁹ Stipulation, which allows for *multiple* definitions to stand concurrently, can countenance the existence of such myriad formations; but it is only by building *inductively* from such definitions (plural) that a more universally generalizable definition (singular) of religion may ultimately be fashioned.

To put the matter differently, while I understand J. Z. Smith to have argued that a real definition of religion is impossible inasmuch as the term refers only to a second-order category that has been imposed on myriad sets of data—whereas Smith suggests that "religion" is only an *idea*, a mode

²⁷In other words, real definitions supporting naturalistic explanations of religion invariably articulate what Wayne Proudfoot has identified as "descriptive reduction," or "the failure to identify an emotion, practice or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it" (1985, 196–97).

²⁸See the immediately preceding footnote.

²⁹Schilbrack follows John Searle in his conception of socially dependent facts: "As John Searle concisely puts it, even though socially dependent facts are ontologically subjective, they are also epistemically objective (Searle 1995: 7–9). They are ontologically subjective in the sense that they require human subjectivity in order to exist; they are brought into existence by and continue to depend on collective human agreement. But socially dependent facts are also epistemically objective in the sense that the facts that make them true are independent of what any individual person thinks" (2010, 1118–19).

of organizing phenomena elected by the scholar, the relationship of the reality “out there” to the mode of organization in the scholar’s mind being entirely contingent on the latter’s intellectual needs and preferences—my contention is not merely that there were cultural phenomena “out there” that were extant before being marked with the label religion but that they were intentionally made and engaged by agents in particular *systems* that patterned speech, acts, emotions, and thoughts. These systems, various though they are, not only are those to which we should apply the label, but they also have real and not merely symbolic consequences “on the ground.”

The hypothesis I wish scholars to test, that is, is that the sites where the term “religion” has been applied presented such self-consciously ordered systems prior to the (modern) application of the name. And although they share this in common and for this reason may be counted a set, they are likely to be contoured differently in their particulars. For although the reality of the referent of the term is here understood to be nothing more than “a social construction and a product of human history,” meaning it logically follows that “religion does not exist as a natural kind” (Schilbrack 2010, 1118) but rather is a “socially dependent fact;”³⁰ and although “religion” certainly is an abstract term with a history of use by academics for “sorting and comparing” (Schilbrack 2010, 1119); and although the category in its history has most frequently been deployed to further political ends, just as it has served to reify a particular understanding of social phenomena; nevertheless, I argue, the term and the category point to an emic concern that existed in particular contexts prior to and independent of the modern scholar’s gaze. This emic concern involves a set of phenomena in human speech, thought, emotion, and action that is rightly understood as a whole. It is one autochthonously conceived; it was a system that had its own particular causal force inasmuch as it could effect certain human behaviors and modes of thinking.³¹

It is precisely to this intention, this self-conscious constructed-ness, that I propose we look as the site for (stipulatively) defining religion. This is to say that religion is, as J. Z. Smith said, essentially an anthropological category (J. Z. Smith 1998, 269), but not *merely* because modern scholars have applied the word to things elected by them to be so labeled but *also*

³⁰See footnotes 16 and 29.

³¹I thus hold a position close to that of Schilbrack, whose “critical realism” “does not deny that ‘religion’ is a product of the European *imaginaire*, nor does it claim that the term is ideologically innocent. On the contrary, it foregrounds the issue of the historical context and the purposes of those who developed the terms. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the word is substantively empty or refers to nothing” (Schilbrack 2010, 1132). A fuller articulation of this position is found in Schilbrack 2014.

because religious agents historically conceived self-consciously of particular cultural patterns as systems that may now be so labeled. Using the term “religion,” then, is justified not only because “the label . . . fits or illuminates that pattern” of self-consciousness but also because the patterns as they are found in their various contexts illuminate—indeed, define and may possibly serve to refine—the label.³²

To sum up: stipulative definitions of religion are necessary for the weak reason that they can define new ways of using the word to apply to particular phenomena in the world. They are also necessary for the strong reason that the particular things in the world properly labeled religion are not only various but *real* in the sense of being socially dependent facts, variously conceived. These facts, moreover, are not—or at the very least in some instances are not—“mere” constructions but are causally efficient; they catalyze particular modes and instances of human thought, emotion, speech, and action in the world. Nor are stipulative definitions exclusive: the academic community *simultaneously* may admit various definitions and explanations of religion, just as one may, for example, variously define “blood” (for various purposes) as that which furnishes the body with oxygen, regulates water balance, destroys invasive elements, removes lactic acid, circulates nutrients, performs certain communicative functions, and helps to regulate body temperature. One stipulation need not perfectly “fit” all phenomena we wish to label “religion” but needs only introduce “new symbols and meanings” by designating a new way of applying the word to a particular thing.³³

In variously deciding stipulatively how to use the term, then, applying it to various exemplars thereof, scholars can develop over time a map of the particular, intentionally and self-consciously ordered systems, or patterns of thought, speech, emotion, and action of the relevant agents themselves, which, though made evident in particular, self-consciously constructed cultural articulations, might well be present even beyond those places where they are first identified. Each system, once excavated, might offer an emically sourced, explanatory reduction of generalizable significance,³⁴ if not to the exclusion of others, just as multiple modes of interpretation might equally illumine the motivations of characters in

³²Here I adapt the language of Schilbrack 2010, 1124.

³³I thus agree with Brian K. Smith that “to define is not to finish, but to start. To define is not to confine, but to create something to refine—and eventually redefine. To define, finally, is not to destroy but to construct for the purpose of useful reflection” (1987, 33; cf. Smith 1987, 53, 55).

³⁴I here refer to Proudfoot’s distinction of explanatory from descriptive reduction, the former described as follows: “*Explanatory reduction* consists in offering an explanation of an experience [of a particular subject] in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval” (1985, 197). On descriptive reduction see footnote 27.

a novel (not least, to extend this analogy, those imagined by the novel's characters themselves). The inductive quality of stipulation thus allows scholars both to tend to the particulars of their evidence and to do so in a manner that may produce generalizable but non-exclusivist models and modes of understanding religion. In what follows I wish to test this proposed method in one cultural, linguistic, political, and geographic context: that of South Asian premodernity.

TOWARD A VOLITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION, DRAWN FROM PREMODERN SOUTH ASIA

Religions in South Asia are internally complex and diverse in their constitution. And, as is well known, generalization about Indian religions—and Hinduism in particular—is notoriously difficult. What I wish here to explore, however, is not a general view of all of Indian religions or of Hinduism at all moments prior to the advent (in the West) of the category and the concept of “religion” but rather a particular episode in those histories, those defined by the mutual formation of the *śramaṇa*, or “striver,” traditions of renunciation in early Buddhism and Hinduism.³⁵ This is to say I wish to examine only one manner of fashioning a socially constructed reality, stipulating only one possible new meaning of the term religion on this basis. For although what was present there articulates a system that organizes speech, thought, emotion, and action in a manner that departs from the formulations captured by conceptions of religion defined by “belief in gods” or the like, it is simply not the case that this particular system embodies the only mode of being religious in the Indian subcontinent in its premodernity.

The time period of the exemplar is significant because it stands—as the method I here propose invites—historically prior to the advent of the category as fashioned in the West, it being, as is well known, of an “interactive kind,” meaning once formed religious agents of various traditions could and did take it up for themselves.³⁶ The particular site of the exemplar I interpret is the early Hindu-Buddhist debate over the nature of self (*ātman*). What is offered by doing so is a system—or rather a pair of competing systems—that modern scholars have labeled “religion.” It articulates a particular model of free agency, of choice: patterns of speech,

³⁵I have in mind the implicit Hindu-Buddhist debate articulated in the early Upaniṣads and early Indian Buddhism in its Pāli language source texts. On this cross-religious engagement, see, for example, Gombrich 1996, 1–95.

³⁶To refer to the category of religion as of an “interactive kind” is, following Schilbrack (2010, 1134), to deploy Ian Hacking’s terminology. Schilbrack there also notes that theologians have occasionally adopted the critique of the category for constructive use.

thought, emotion, and action that suggest individual subjects may have full and direct soteriological knowledge *with no relationally dependent subjectivity implied or demanded to achieve their religious ends*, inasmuch as the mode of achieving those ends involves a simple and direct realization in subjective experience of the nature of external reality, of the external universe.

Adherents to the elected Buddhist and Hindu traditions are self-conscious in the sense that they claimed rational, objectively knowable reasons for articulating the positions they held just as they allowed them to be subjected to doubt and foreign scrutiny. They knew at the time of the formulation of their ideas and practices that one could choose to accept various interpretations of the world just as they knew one conceivably could choose not to accept any of the extant eschatological and soteriological views on offer in their day. What was proffered, then, was not a matter of “belief” in the existence of a particular nature of reality but rather a *choice* of whether to accept a particular interpretation of the observable nature of reality as true or not.

Adherents of each tradition knew others interpreted the extant evidence of the nature of reality differently and that experience of the same could be variously understood. They understood that fruitfully debating the merits of one view or another required common ground for debate, found in the form of appeal to commonly acceptable, real-world phenomena—hard data.³⁷ They knew the systematizations of thought, speech, emotion, and action they fashioned could be brought to bear in comparison and debate, that they could be set and indeed were set in relation to one another under the terms of a more generic set of categories of concern. It is in this sense that these traditions may be said to have offered in and with the questions they posed a *second-order discourse* regarding the nature of reality, the constitution of the self within it, and the solutions they articulated regarding what, precisely, an individual could *do* given the subject’s position in existence, so defined.

The broader Hindu and Buddhist traditions in question admitted of superhuman beings, of course, for Indian religions in their premodernity are replete with models of religiosity—with structures that patterned speech, act, emotion, and thought—that understood all, or nearly all, human aims to involve various possible modes of interaction with them.

³⁷I have in mind here the definition of the *dr̥ṣṭānta* or “example” used to justify a particular logical claim, this according to the rules of debate established by the *Nyāyasūtras* at 1.1.25: *laukikaparīkṣa-kāṇāṃ yasmin arthe buddhisāmyam saḥ dr̥ṣṭāntaḥ*. “That object about which both everyday people and experts have the same opinion is a [valid] example.” Whatever the actual dates of composition of the *Nyāyasūtras*, this definition captures the spirit of the Hindu-Buddhist engagements in question.

But the systems identified in this review were explicit in eschewing this mode of behavior in favor of a do-it-yourself paradigm that rendered the superhuman adventitious to their soteriologies.³⁸ The implicit and explicit second-order category of comparison was *not* that of faith in gods or even the efficacy of the Vedas—indeed, belief was not a major soteriological category at all. These agents instead understood their systems of thought and practice to be grounded in careful, *objective and rational*, analysis of the nature of the external universe—understood either to be fundamentally ontologically whole (on the early Hindu, Upaniṣadic view) or an ordered but ever-changing flux of events, a perpetual chain of impermanent causality (as in early Buddhism).³⁹

The *śramaṇas* or ascetics who came to know these competing views of reality inferred from them—and were said ultimately to experience directly—the nature of one's subjective existence as of a kind that precisely mirrored external reality: “self” (for the Hindus) or “no-self” (for the Buddhists) was for each tradition merely another instantiation, another point or moment or instant, of the natural, knowable, and objective reality identified by each, for each tradition understood human subjectivity to be constituted precisely as was all of existence. Consequent on this understanding were articulated concomitant and coordinated sets of normative and prescribed patterns of thought, speech, emotion, action, and structured social relations that were to be individually and strenuously cultivated.

The nature of self or no-self, simply, was understood to be intellectually conceivable and logically provable, because it qualitatively matched

³⁸Thus, although in early Buddhism one “takes refuge” in the Buddha and his teachings and is supported by a community of fellow seekers (*bhikkhus*), the goal may only be realized subjectively, in one's own experience. Each had to squelch one's desires for oneself. Thus, the Buddha famously called on his community of practitioners (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 2.100, cited in Gombrich 1988, 89) to live as “islands unto themselves, their own resorts” (*atta-dīpā...atta-saraṇā*). Similarly, the gnosis of the early Upaniṣads, although in part the product of contact with a competent teacher, requires one to come to know the nature of reality directly (see, e.g., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-5: “He who, knowing this syllable [i.e., *om*], utters it enters this very syllable, the immortal sound that is fearless. Having entered it, the Gods were immortal; so, [by entering it,] one becomes immortal” (*sa ya etad evaṃ vidvān akṣaram praṇauṭy etad evākṣaram svaram amṛtam abhayaṃ praviśati | tat praviśya yad amṛtā devās tad amṛto bhavati* |)).

One may be aided on these paths by relations with others, even eminently capable others; but the paths to the goal may only be trodden by oneself, salvation only achieved for oneself in one's subjective experience. The soteriology is purely subjective, a non-relationally dependent form of direct knowing.

³⁹See, for example, Collins 1982, 89–90, esp. fn. 8, which cites the *Majjhima Nikāya* 3.251 and the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 5.8 as referring to the Four Noble Truths and (at *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 2.17) Dependent Origination as the objects that must be intellectually understood in “Right Knowledge,” a core building block of this Buddhist path to liberation. See also, for example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.12-14, where the famous example of salt in water is given. It is a rational understanding of the same (ultimately followed by direct experience thereof) that conduces to liberation.

the nature of the external and knowable universe of phenomena, a universe that was either conceived to be one, unchanging, and a part of a whole (the Hindu *ātman*) or complex, synthesized, ever in flux (the Buddhist non-self or *anātman*). Both the true nature of the subject and of the external universe were held to be *directly* knowable in individual, subjective intuition and experience—if, that is, the right mode of subjectivity was properly cultivated. Gods or “superhumans” might in places appear, of this there was no doubt; but no respite there was to be found or sought, rather the opposite: engagement with the supernatural was often seen not only to be adventitious but also detrimental to achieving the subjective gnosis that promised spiritual emancipation.⁴⁰

In short, to label this *system* (or, rather, this pair of mutually informed, mutually constituted, and competing systems) an exemplar of “culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhumans” is simply not apposite to the structure of self-understanding there articulated. For the self (*ātman*), or the conglomerate of concomitant causes that constituted the subject at the site of an in-fact absent self (*anātman*), inasmuch as each was conceived as fully equipped in its own constitution to speak, think, feel, and act in ways that would allow a recognition or realization of its nature as of a kind with that same objective reality was subjectively entirely devoid of relational dependence vis-à-vis any soteriological experience they conceived that might properly be labeled “religious.” One could *only* achieve what there was to achieve in and for oneself; no doctrine of grace defined either tradition.

TOWARD A VOLITIONAL DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Scholars of any religious stripe or none at all of course need not accept as *true* any of these precepts nor adopt the concomitant practices; yet, the system they present is of generalizable significance simply inasmuch as the models of subjectivity here cited *demand*ed the *concomitant formation of normative social institutions*. That is, particular conceptions of the external world and the subject—the self or *ātman*, no-self or *anātman*—effected the need for particular modes of social interaction. For in the latter could be found particular ways of self-engagement not only by regulating (for example) what to eat and with whom, what occupation one could rightly engage or words properly use, or which rituals one could be required to do and to what ends (or to do none) but also by determining whether one should choose intentionally to act or not, to cultivate intellectual ideas or suppress them, to become sensitive to one’s sensations or inured to them.

⁴⁰See footnote 38.

Normative standards were fashioned in each tradition for all of the above, all properly patterned in mutual relation. And so much was true in various ways across premodern Indian religions. A self or *ātman* understood as pure consciousness demanded a particular model of social interaction vis-à-vis caste, for example, just as rigid adherence to caste in another system brought with it a conception of the subject as materially marked by that identity, all the world being populated equally by entities that by their very natures—in their very materiality—were pure or impure to varying degrees. Elsewhere, a world understood as existent apart from one's subjective awareness of it was understood to demand an agency rooted in action wherein the actions alone and not the agent's intentions were understood to be efficacious. The models in fact are numerous and were elaborated with a staggering variety; some were in fact complex, demanding of one and the same individual two distinct modes of subjectivity, each coupled with its own concomitant and normatively ordered social compact, each operative in particular ritual or social contexts (for which see [Nemec 2020](#)).

The essential point, then, is not merely that patterns of speech, thought, emotion, and action were systematized but that the normative understanding of the nature of the subject was coordinated with a normative understanding of the relationship of that subject to society and to the wider natural or physical universe. Each demanded a limited and defined type of structured engagement from the other. The subject's double nature—part physical (or apparently physical) agent who could act in observable ways, part private subject who could know of internal states of consciousness, whether cognitive, discursive, sense-related, or affective—was necessarily ordered in a manner that reflected social relations and engagement with the wider natural world. This model, this system, may stand as a “socially dependent fact” that may be labeled as “religion.” On this basis I stipulate that religion is a volitional system that structures the normative understanding of one binary—the subject in their (a) internal states of consciousness and (b) observable action—in a manner that conditions and is conditioned by the normative understanding of another binary, viz., that of (a) the individual subject in relation to (b) the social world and the wider, physical or natural, world.

In suggesting that volition lay at the heart of this stipulation, I use the term in two senses. First, I mean it in the contextual sense of the traditions as they articulated it, in particular the *śramaṇa* or “ascetic” traditions identified in the previous section of this article. “Volition” in that context means to suggest that it was not the choice of a god, or supreme being, that would determine whether one could achieve the most vaunted

of soteriological ends—whether that choice were understood to be one of divinely ordained predestination, discretion in defining how individuals must act in covenant with divinely mandated laws, or otherwise—but rather the election of the individual subject alone to pursue the arduous, do-it-yourself path to the same (though of course in a manner dependent on the consequences and opportunities furnished by the subject's past actions or *karmans*). Monadic agents had in their power the *choice* of pursuing a direct awareness of what was thought *always to be present*, a true, fully observable and *knowable* nature of reality, what was equally the nature of self (or no-self) because it was the nature of the external universe.⁴¹ As much as mystical traditions admit of intricate elaboration in premodern South Asia, then, and while the divine has been imagined by one traditional enumeration in at least 330 million forms, it is this possibility of gnostic certainty that guaranteed the renunciants' paths, these particular competing systems of South Asian religion that conceived a form of liberating subjective awareness that was utterly relationally independent. To chase and achieve *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa*, although subjected to the invariant laws of *karman*, nevertheless at base was determined by the monadic agent's determination, by their will or volition, the choice to pursue just that.

These choices and the consequences thereof no doubt cannot determine the contours of the academic study of religion across cultures, geographies, and historical periods. But in them may be generalized what could perhaps be applicable across traditions, histories, and geographies in a manner supportive of an explanatory reduction (as Proudfoot has conceived of it).⁴² Taking off to the degree possible, that is, the frame of the lexical meaning of the term, so too the various extant real definitions, "religion" in India's premodernity uncovers a mode of self-consciousness, a second-order mode of thinking, and a habit of *choice* in interpretation; this could, in turn, inform our understanding of religion. It suggests that a new understanding of subjectivity *demands* a novel understanding of social relations and the relationship of that subject to the wider, natural world and *vice versa*. The choices that adherents to particular traditions make regarding one of these binaries effect the ways one may conceive the contours of the other. Volition is meant here in this more fundamental sense as well.

More specifically, this second sense of "volition" means to emphasize a difference of interpretation here with what precedes it in the history

⁴¹To put the concern more succinctly and following Staal, "in India, the unseen is resorted to only under duress" (1979, 7).

⁴²See footnote 34 and compare with footnote 27.

of scholarship on religion, for the dynamic—the system—I here identify with “religion” has not gone unrecognized, *mutatis mutandis*, in European and North American scholarly discourse. It is only that when identified there it has been understood to encase a causal process that acts *on* human agents rather than a causal force effected *by* them. Durkheim, for example, understands the social to produce a capacity for subjective consciousness, only after which a monadic agent may think and act as such. The relation of the subject to society is such that the latter creates the former, not the other way around (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 1–18 and 440–48.). Freud in turn understands the primal horde in a time before recordable history to have *acted* in a manner that causes a tripartition of subjective awareness in which the Superego serves to forestall impulses like those of the horde. The observable actions of that social group determine the nature of monadic subjectivity; the subject cannot choose internal states of consciousness differently structured (Freud [1930] 1961, 53–56, 93–96; Freud [1912–1913] 1950, 3–23). And Marx understood the material means of production to effect consciousness itself, to make subjective awareness possible at all.⁴³ In each case, monadic agents are made by these relations (of subject to the social group, of the observable actions of individuals and their internal states of consciousness). They have no agency in electing how this pair of binaries—subjective consciousness and observable individual action, the subject in relation to society and the wider natural world—might be fashioned in mutual relation. In referring to a *volitional* definition of religion, I mean to suggest that the interpretive choices of religious agents in fact *make* such relations, as the exemplar here elected suggests.

The significance, then, of this inversion is that it recognizes an inversion of the causal flow in these binaries. And if we read history correctly, it is only right to stake this claim and offer this inversion, for the record is clear enough: the systems as identified, once made, were both clearly present and set to be adopted by others than those who made them. They were made by some (guided by their commitment to what they understood to be *true*), and they were adopted by many. Not only was a dynamic of power at play—some agents having the capacity, the foresight, the occasion, and the privilege to make such systems; others conforming to the same whether wittingly or unwittingly, willingly or forcibly—but once made these systems defined and limited the possible and habitual exercises of choice individuals could practically make vis-à-vis these binaries. Some choices in coordinating these binaries were made by some for

⁴³This point is made in various works, but see, e.g., *The German Ideology: Part I*, in Tucker 1978, 157–58.

others, whether those others knew it or not. One choice in forming one of these binaries demanded that they make parallel and compatible choices for the other, and, once formed, the relations set among these binaries directed human action, thought, feeling, and expression, defining the limits of their normativity and acceptability.

CONCLUSION

Religion, on the present definition, then, is something real, a socially dependent fact. It was present before the development of the modern, lexical sense of the term. And inasmuch as “religion” so understood names a particular, self-consciously ordered *system*, the socially dependent fact in question—the system—merits its own label.⁴⁴ Religion, I stipulate, names *systems* intentionally—volitionally—ordered by those who engage and live them.

What makes the system is the very fact that the social rules, cultivated feelings and emotive states, patterns of thought, actions, and manners and contents of speech are not merely engaged by “followers” of the religion but are ordered in a manner allowing those who prescribe them possibly to compare the same with other systems. A second-order level of imagination structures—creates—the system here identified. “Religion,” on this view, refers to the *ordered structure* of thought, emotion, speech, and action in mutual relation, then, inasmuch as the very nature of the thoughts, emotions, speech, and actions prescribed and engaged were set in their normative parameters by way of such second-order, self-reflexive imagination. By defining religion as a system, this is to say, the effects of such human choices are taken into full account in defining “religion.”

Generalizing from a single exemplar, I have proposed that one such system is defined by the fact that the choices religious agents make in structuring and engaging thought and other subjective states serve to contour structures of practice—and *vice versa*—all while serving to negotiate the relationship of monadic agents to larger social structures and the wider, natural world. To identify and examine this system of paired binaries is to understand ideas, emotive states, and human actions as necessarily embedded in social contexts and to see innovation in one as anticipating innovations in the others. Focus on such a system therefore may

⁴⁴This is to say the alternative strategies for negotiating the fraught history of the term religion—those of furnishing “bigger” or “smaller” interpretive categories—may not here suffice. The formation of “bigger” categories is proposed, for example, by Dubuisson (2003, 90; cited in Schilbrack 2010, 1128), “smaller” categories by, for example, Fitzgerald (2000, chapter 6; also cited in Schilbrack 2010, 1129).

accommodate the study of *change* in religions (what is vital to any “scientific study of religion”), because some changes in thought and practice will demand others and may be traced across time.⁴⁵

Although the volitional system here identified is one elicited from a particular historical exemplar, I suggest it may be possible to find it present in other contexts, historical periods, and religious traditions than the ones from which it is drawn. This is to say there may be other tokens of “religion” as it is here defined.

In addition, there may be other manners of structuring the paired binaries I have identified above, that is, there may be other ways of forming the system that the stipulation I offer identifies. Take the role of belief, for example. I have argued that the system in question is structured around non-relationally dependent agents; it is a system that stipulates that actions and not beliefs (or even thoughts) fundamentally determine one’s soteriological trajectory. What this suggests is that belief (for example) has no primary role in the structure of the system as found in the present exemplar. Of course, agents who fashioned and engaged the system in question would have held beliefs about various things—that the sun would rise in the morning, that they had reason to trust a loved one, or even that the rituals or meditative actions they engaged in had efficacy. But in the exemplar examined, particular actions and not particular beliefs were deemed vital to success on the soteriological path; no practice of belief stands at the heart of the system in question. Yet, it is also possible to conceive of a system formed around belief that organizes the same binaries identified above. This is to say that it is possible not only for other tokens of the volitional definition articulated above to exist but also other types as well.

I have offered, above, the analogies of literary interpretation and the functioning of blood to articulate how I imagine stipulative definition may work in the study of religion.⁴⁶ With them I meant to argue that various definitions of religion might simultaneously be found applicable in a single context of human thought, speech, emotion, and action. Some stipulations might elevate some dimensions of human activity over others,

⁴⁵Because it seeks to understand “religion” as what is constructed by the choices of the particular agents who fashion the system, moreover, the present definition accommodates an understanding of change as occurring “from below” as well as “from above.” For new practices in a society, even if untheorized or unauthorized, will, if they are significant to the system, require a concomitant change in thinking and feeling, and ultimately a new, formalized theorization thereof; and new ideas, as they spread and are accepted (whether fashioned by a social elite or emerging from other parts of society), will engender new actions, all in the context of patterned social relations.

⁴⁶Reference to blood and its functioning is meant only to offer an analogy, not a social-functional explanation of religion, which has been criticized for the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent, though Andrew Dole (2018) suggests this criticism is only partially valid.

but this need not vitiate other interpretive concerns or possibilities, which might be found concurrently present whether from the perspective of the scholar or that of the practitioner. It may be possible, for example, to find contexts where Spiro's (lexical) definition of religion applies as much as the one I stipulate above. Put differently, because stipulation pursues a modest purpose—that of defining the way a word (“religion”) is used, not the very nature of a thing (“religion”) in the world—it is possible for the term in question to be used in nuanced and layered ways. Other manners of understanding religion *as a system* might be conceived, even concurrently with the present one. Or other stipulations might profitably be formed in defining religion not as a system but in some other way. Either way, I argue that new stipulations may free scholars from a narrowed view of religion as it is lexically defined, the lexical or common sense of the term itself being the product of a history of stipulation (in the Modern West).

Stipulative definition has power, I further argue, not merely because it is modestly concerned with language use, with how a term is deployed. I argue that particular human activity, what may be *named* stipulatively by the term “religion,” is complex and even polyvalent or symbolic in scope, what explains why multiple interpretive models thereof (supported by various definitions of “religion”) may simultaneously be applicable. Stipulative definition allows one to conceive of religion in just such complexity. By foregoing both real definition, which strictly narrows the possible scope of the thing being defined, and the other mode of nominal definition available to us—lexical definition, which narrows the use of the term “religion” to a meaning established in a particular historical moment—the scholar is freed inductively to develop various ways of speaking about an object that is itself as variously ordered as human intention can afford.

If the connection I wish to fashion between the word and the thing it names is contingent, however, this is not to suggest that the thing named is unreal. Indeed, “religion” on the present understanding offers not merely a system of symbols but a tangible, causally empowered systematization of subjective awareness and action, operative not only on solemn occasions but also in quotidian life and both in one's solitude and in social relations, all mutually constituted and with regard for the material reality standing external to social individuals. The lived experiences that religion effects, on this understanding, are not merely overlain on a reality independent of it.⁴⁷ Rather, religion so defined must be understood to help *to constitute* a

⁴⁷This differentiates the present model with that of Geertz's (1966, 4) system of symbols, his definition being the closest among the extant possibilities to the model I here have examined.

lived, socialized reality that is acted out and is real—indeed, one that is no less real for its being imagined.⁴⁸

There are, of course, limits to stipulation, as Robinson himself noted.⁴⁹ The usefulness and aptness of various stipulative definitions will have to be determined inductively and on a case-by-case basis. It is unlikely that defining “religion” as a “flightless bird,” for example, will yield interpretive insight.⁵⁰ Although I propose that the definition here offered clears a path for a comparative and nuanced approach to the study of religion beyond the exemplars here engaged, I simultaneously hope and expect scholars will produce other stipulative definitions of religion generalized from other historically located exemplars, whether they identify other *systems* thereby or take other approaches altogether to defining the term.⁵¹ For what I intend with the volitional definition on offer is a sort of explanatory reductionism (as Proudfoot has defined it);⁵² and if a “science of religion” is to be possible I have no doubt it can only be a *human* science, meaning that it will have to set at its core a deep appreciation of the various *choices* and interpretive approaches of the relevant human agents themselves.

It might in the end be the case that the definition here stipulated proves to be too broad, to define “culture” in general rather than the more specific subset of cultural phenomena that might be labeled “religion.” Perhaps one could limit the present definition by defining the binaries identified particularly as they are mutually formed in relation to soteriological aims. Yet, I do not think the present definition fails for the reasons identified by Arnal in “substantivist” or “culturalist”/ “functionalist” ones; the definition specifies a single system that (particularly if set in relation to soteriological aims) may be distinguished clearly from other cultural formations, and it does not rely on substantivist claims (though, as a form of explanatory reductionism, it does not in any way deny the possibility of the existence of the divine). Because what is offered means not to define

⁴⁸Anderson [1983] 2006, 5–7 makes a closely similar point. Cf. Asad 2003, 194 (also cited in Schilbrack 2010, 1120).

⁴⁹See Robinson [1950] 1962, 80–92 for his fifteen “rules” for stipulative deninition. He also outlines the “advantages and disadvantages of stipulative definitions” ([1950] 1962, 66–80).

⁵⁰This is the exemplar offered by an anonymous reviewer who rightly questioned the limits of stipulation in defining “religion.”

⁵¹Stipulation, this is to argue, allows for the production of new definitions of religion that “allow one to know just a bit” of it, and thus is of utility, as McCutcheon says it is, as a result of “its ability to exclude items from consideration” (2003, 33). Yet, because the stipulative definition assumes other efforts like it will be essayed, it allows in its very purpose (viz., positing new ways of applying a word to a thing) for the simultaneous entertainment of multiple definitions, which, when inductively formed and collected, promise inclusivity without compromising analytic rigor in definitional procedures.

⁵²Indeed, there is no effort to eliminate the transcendent in the present definition, because the definitional purpose in question is about language use and not the true nature of reality. See also above at footnote 42; cf. footnotes 27 and 34.

what “religion” truly *is* and always must be but only how the term may be used, the present definition does not fall into the trap that mars real definitions, whether they support substantivist or culturalist/functionalist claims, just as it avoids reducing “religion” only to a single, lexical definition shaped by a particular cultural history.

It is my hope that the definition of religion here proffered is of interpretive use for drawing attention to the intersectionality of subjectivity and social institutions, the patterning of subjective experience and overt practice that illustrates the possibility of fruitfully thinking of religion without exclusively privileging the role of the gods in the same.⁵³ At base and most simply, the present definition suggests that interpretive choices matter, because they form realities and shape possibilities in human experience both for those who took such influential choices and those who lived or live with them. For to define religion as a *system* (and as the particular system here identified) is to suggest that the constructions of socially dependent facts effected by or for those who engage and live the traditions in question are causally efficacious and in this sense constitute a real *imaginaire*. If, moreover, scholars are inductively to develop a truly universally applicable definition of religion, it will need to account for just such choices—the very volitional acts of system formation—that set the contours of human religious activity. So much more the reason, then, for stipulative definition, which may freely and simultaneously admit of a plurality of perspectives on a mode of human activity and understanding—“religion”—that has been and likely will be engaged with tremendous variety and across the gamut of human geographies for the foreseeable future.

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⁵³I am hardly the first scholar of South Asian religions to recommend we think about Hinduism without privileging the “transcendent.” See, e.g., Brian K. Smith where he quotes van Buitenen’s definitional statement about Hinduism (1987, 35).

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