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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Five concepts of religion

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In the face of continuing debate about the adequacy and definition of the concept of ‘religion’, this paper argues that it is necessary for the social sciences to become more self-critical about their various – and changing – uses of the term. As this paper shows, three main uses are currently dominant: religion as belief/meaning, religion as identity, and religion as structured social relations. By contrast, some uses which were once important are currently recessive, including Marxist approaches to religion as ideology, and Parsonian conceptions of religion as norms and values. Some new uses are also emerging, including ‘material’ religion, religion as discourse, and religion as practice. Drawing these together, the paper proposes a taxonomy of five main major uses of the term. It reflects on their adequacy, and points out where there are still occlusions: above all with regard to ‘super-social’ or ‘meta-social’ relations with non-human or quasi-human beings, forces and powers.

Keywords: religion; concept; definition; criticism

Introduction

The concept of religion has never been uncontentious, and its critics have never been quiet. Today it faces criticisms from a number of directions, some old and some new. Controversy over the definition of religion is a constant. It has proved impossible to fix on a definition which all – or even a majority – can agree. But in this regard ‘religion’ is little different from ‘the economy’, ‘politics’, ‘society’ or ‘history’ – and scholars in all these areas proceed quite happily without necessarily being able to define their object of study. The difficulty of definition arises from the fact that these are not indexical terms but general concepts which direct attention to complex constellations and aspects of social and material relations for certain purposes. However, the definition of religion is not the same as the concept of religion. The latter faces additional difficulties. Christian theologians have long objected that ‘religion’ is a modern concept which carries a baggage of secular presuppositions, and which narrows, distorts, and sucks the living truth out of that which it attempts to dissect (e.g. Cantwell-Smith 1962, John Milbank 1991, Karl Barth 1997). Others object that the concept of religion is too Christian rather than too secular. Thus Thomas Luckmann (1967) argued that sociological studies of religion hugged the form of the churches so closely that they rendered other manifestations of religion ‘invisible’. Postcolonial critiques expand this line of argument by showing that the concept of religion has ethnocentric imperialist biases, and fails to do justice to

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non-Western cultures by forcing them into a Western straitjacket (e.g. Asad 2003, Balangangadhara 1994; but for a defence see Reader and Tanabe [1998] on religion in Japan). Looking at academic approaches to 'spirituality', Woodhead (2010a) points out the implicit normativity of many sociological conceptions of religion, in which a norm of 'real' religion (congregational, orderly, civic) has the effect of constructing alternative forms of religion as 'fuzzy', 'individualistic', 'eclectic' and even 'narcissistic'.

An interesting response to these debates is found in Jim Beckford's proposal that the concept of religion should be tied more closely to its contexts of use (Beckford 2003). The proposal is for a moderate form of social constructionism which denies that there is an essence of religion, and views the concept as essentially contested. These contests are not merely academic, but constitute the social life of religion. Religion is constantly being constructed, as political and legal authorities claim the right to define religion, some social groups vie for the privilege of being counted as religious, others seek to wrest control of the meaning of religion from dominant groups, and still others seek to restrict religion and its sphere of influence. Although Beckford has proved the value of his approach in his own empirical work, for example on cult controversies (Beckford 1985) and religion in prisons (Beckford and Gilliat 1998), it is easiest to apply when the category of 'religion' is clearly in play. However, that is often not the case, since individuals and groups regularly classified as religious may not use or accept the term themselves. Nor do they necessarily use other staple terms of scholarly discussion, such as Christian, Buddhist, theist, agnostic, New Age, sectarian, and so on. Thus the problem remains that scholars of religion need some broad conception of religion in order even to identify a suitable field for study. As some propose, it is possible to drop the category of religion altogether, and revert to existing categories such as culture and politics. But these are no less problematic (or ethnocentric), and given the academy's existing secular bias, the likely result will not be a new attentiveness to aspects of social life which have previously been neglected.

The solution to these issues proposed here is that the social scientific study of religion should simply become more self-conscious and self-critical in its approach to 'religion'. It is not necessary to begin each study with a definition of religion, but it is necessary to have some critical awareness of what concept(s) of religion are in play, and to be able to justify their applicability in particular contexts of use. Unlike definitions, which try to single out certain essential characteristics, concepts derive their meaning from the wider frameworks in which they are embedded. These may be theoretical, historical, empirical, methodological, and normative – or, more often, all of these. For example, the concept of religion as a matter of *belief* may be bound up with a cognitive theory of religion, reference to a dogmatic form of Protestantism, the fact that a study is focused upon a literate clerical élite, or that the researcher is using methods which rely upon explicit articulation of beliefs. It may be possible to justify this concept of religion, but in order to do so it is necessary to be able to show why it is appropriate within the research design as a whole. And in order to do that, it is vital to have some sense of the alternative concepts which could be employed.

To this end, this paper offers a taxonomy of five major concepts of religion in social scientific study, particularly in the Anglophone world.¹ Often these are implicit in scholarly work; more rarely they are the subject of discussion and debate. All have some history in the social scientific study of religion, in particular in sociological

approaches to religion, and it is to these that the paper pays greatest attention. But the study of religion is an inherently multi- and inter-disciplinary area, so attention is also given to anthropological, historical and phenomenological approaches where these have made a major contribution to the development of the concepts under discussion, and where they have things to teach the social sciences. The first two concepts discussed – religion as culture, and religion as identity – dominate recent social scientific work. The third – religion as relationship – has been important in sociology where social relations are concerned, but less so when relations with ‘super-social’ beings are also introduced. The fourth – religion as practice – has long been central in anthropology and is currently being taken more seriously in the sociology of religion. And the fifth – religion as power – is recessive in sociology, but in urgent need of revival. Within each of these five main categories a number of sub-categories are explored, and in most of the discussions attention moves from the narrowest interpretation of the concept to the broadest. There is a similar ordering in the listing of the five categories. Thus it is argued that the concept of religion as power is the broadest of all, with something important to add to all of those which precede.

Religion as culture

Religion as belief and meaning

One of the most popular conceptions of religion today – if one takes as evidence not only academic work but the discourse of politicians, legal professionals, journalists, and everyday talk – is of religion as belief. On this account, being religious has to do with believing certain things, where that amounts to subscribing to certain propositions and accepting certain doctrines. Sometimes the content of belief is further specified in definitions of religion: for example, belief in the existence of supernatural beings or forces.

This account gains plausibility from a number of interlocking sources. The ‘confessionalization’ of religion in the post-Reformation period tended to define and distinguish different forms of religion (particularly Christianity) in terms of distinctive ‘confessions’ of faith (Woodhead 2004). Many forms of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism have sharpened this tendency by making assent to a set of propositions a test of orthodoxy. Under the influence of positivism, some sociology of religion in the post-Second World War period reinforced this account by reducing religion to quantifiable ‘items’ (such as membership and assent to propositional beliefs) which could be quantified using survey instruments. Legal accounts of religion often take a similarly belief-based view of religion, as in the common tendency in the USA to define religion (broadly) in terms of ‘sincerely-held religious, moral or ethical beliefs’, and (narrowly) as beliefs asserted in an ‘authoritative sacred text’ and ‘classic formulations of doctrine and practice’ (Sullivan 2005, p. 147). Critics of religion, including several of the ‘new atheists’, reinforce this understanding of religion by treating religion as a matter of belief in the supernatural. For Richard Dawkins (2006), for example, religion is primarily a matter of assent to *false* beliefs which fly in the face of scientific evidence.

Thus the conception of religion as a matter of belief is a distinctively modern one, with a bias towards modern Christian, especially Protestant, forms of religion

(though a ‘beliefification’ of religion is also evident in other world religions in modern times). Above all, it seems to be bound up with a scientism and empiricism which assumes that all knowledge is primarily a matter of (testable) propositional belief,² and with a shift of attention from the oral and practised to the literate and encoded (Needham 1972, Ruel 1982).

Religion as meaning and cultural order

A similarly culturally oriented understanding of religion, but with a much broader conception of culture than ‘belief’, is evident in sociological and anthropological approaches to religion which interpret religion as an embracing system of meaning which covers the whole of life.

Peter Berger’s endorsement of this approach in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) gave it new influence in sociology. For Berger, religion provides a system of meaning for making sense of the world, and for covering contingency with a canopy of sacrality and taken-for-grantedness. Berger suggests that human beings need to be able to impose cognitive order upon the chaotic disorderliness of reality in order to be able to function at all. This is not an individual but a social achievement: cultural order makes social life possible, and society makes cultural order possible. In relation to secularization, Berger argues that religion is undermined not so much by the breakdown of social community, but by the rise of cognitive pluralism in modern societies in which individuals can hardly avoid coming into contact with a plethora of other belief systems.

Berger’s work has obvious continuities with Max Weber’s approach to religion, insofar as Weber understood religion – in modern societies at least – as a cultural, cognitive force which helps to make sense of the world by providing meaning, values, and sacred symbols. Thus, for Weber, a key way of classifying religions is in terms of their theodicies, that is to say, the ways in which they explain the inexplicable, and hence render life meaningful. For Weber, it is when religious understandings of the world become implausible, in the context of rationalization, that religion comes under challenge.

Just as Berger popularized the idea of religion as a system of meaning in modern sociology, so Clifford Geertz’s essay on ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ (1971, first published in 1966) played a similar role in anthropology. Geertz goes further than Berger, however, in developing a more complex account of culture. Culture, for Geertz, is made up of interconnected myths, rituals, symbols, and beliefs which together form enacted and embodied systems for making sense of the whole of life. For him too, cultural and religious systems are orders of meaning which hold cultural chaos and social disintegration at bay. They can be ‘read’ and interpreted by the observing, participating ethnographer. Geertz also goes further than Berger in stressing the emotional as well as intellectual dimensions and impacts of culture. **As he puts it in his famous definition of religion, it is: ‘(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’ (Geertz 1971, p. 4).**

Despite criticisms concerning its lack of attention to power relations (most notably by Asad 1993), the lasting influence of Geertz’s account is visible in many

later works on religion which assume or emphasize the latter's role in the construction of a sense of order and significance. As Morton Klass puts it in his tellingly titled book *Ordered Universes* (1995, p. 38), for example: 'Religion in a given society will be that instituted process of interaction among the members of that society – and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted – which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible'.

The concept of religion as cultural order has been extended in the last decade or so by studies of religion which pay much greater attention to *material* culture. This development, signalized by the launch of the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* in 2005 has been pioneered by scholars such as Colleen McDannell (1995) and David Morgan (1998), both of whom argue that objects play an indispensable role in ordering cultural and social life. As McDannell (1995, p. 272) puts it: 'Artifacts become particularly important in the lives of average Christians because objects can be exchanged, gifted, reinterpreted and manipulated. People need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with supernatural characters, family and friends. Christians use goods and create religious landscapes to tell themselves and the world around them who they are'. Attention to other cultural media, including media of mass communication and 'new' media such as the internet, represents an additional development (see, for example Hoover 2006).

Religion as values

A related but interestingly different cultural approach gives greater emphasis to the normative dimension of religion. Both Weber and Durkheim convey a lively sense of religion's role in shaping, symbolizing, communicating, stabilizing and sacralizing shared *values*. Talcott Parsons, inspired by both, goes further in his emphasis on religion as above all a focus of societal values (e.g. Parsons 1935, 1979). That makes religion socially indispensable in the Parsonian scheme, given that all social action is value-directed, and social coherence is undergirded by value-convergence. Thus religion provides a well-functioning society with the shared goals which make it coherent, and which can maintain coherence even in the face of differentiation. Unlike Weber, Parsons does not see modernization as corrosive of religion, but as involving a transformation and social diffusion of religion. For him, modern American society depends upon its underpinning in the value-system of liberal Protestantism (1968).

It is interesting to compare Parson's concept of religion with De Tocqueville's historic analysis of the role of religion in American democracy (1988, first published in two volumes in 1835/40). Although both consider values to be of central social significance, and both view religion as a sphere of sacred values, De Tocqueville has a somewhat broader conception of religion. For him religion is a matter of 'mores', by which he means: 'not only . . . "*moeurs*" in the strict senses, which might be called the habits of the heart, but also . . . the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits. So I use the word to cover the whole moral and intellectual state of a people' (1988, p. 287). Influenced by both De Tocqueville and Parsons, Robert Bellah developed Parsons's conception of an American 'civil religion', and taxonomized American religion and culture in terms of its value-orientations in the book whose title is taken

from De Tocqueville: *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah *et al.* 1985). Bellah's collaborator, Steven Tipton, also exemplifies a normative approach to religion, most clearly in *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (Tipton 1982). The American – but not European – tradition of cultural sociology (in which another of the *Habits* authors, Ann Swidler, is prominent), has absorbed this approach (see, for example Spillman 2001).

In Europe, the concept of religion as values has been less influential, despite the fact that an approach which took the value dimension of religion seriously was institutionalized in the European Values Surveys and, later the World Values Surveys, both of which have roots in the Catholic tradition of sociological study of religion. European cultural sociology, and the separate field of 'cultural studies', have tended to ignore religion (and values) altogether, and the European tradition of reflection on civil society has also tended to ignore religion (as documented by Herbert [2003]). Social and cultural history furnishes a partial exception. In *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, for example, Hugh McLeod sets secularization in the wider context of value-change in Western societies. Tracing a shift from values of order, decency, respectability, authority, convention and 'normality' to values of freedom, extended democracy, personal empowerment, self-expression, equality and participation, McLeod notes how older working-class men and women explain their actions by saying 'it was the thing to do', whereas the catch-phrase of the 1960s is, 'do your own thing' (pp. 108–109). Far from representing a rejection of morality, he presents the sixties counter-culture as intensely moral,³ and suggests that Christianity was bound up with the value wars of the time, caught awkwardly between the old moral order and the new.

Religion as discourse

The social historian Callum Brown's approach to religion shares a good deal with McLeod, but reveals the tendency evident amongst religion scholars influenced by Foucault to treat religion as 'discourse' rather than culture or values (Brown 2000, 2006). What this implies varies considerably between different scholars. In Brown's case it means that he eschews the approach to religion which treats it as a set of quantifiable beliefs and behaviours (above all, church attendance), and takes as his sources not data from surveys, but popular religious literature, sermons, magazines, artefacts, novels and tracts. He is interested in religion as embedded in language and, above all, in narratives. This gives rise to a fresh account of secularization which, for Brown, is a matter of contingent 'de-Christianization' brought about by the collapse in plausibility of an evangelical narrative which had for well over a century managed to make sense of individual lives – particularly women's lives – by anchoring them in a larger narrative of sin and salvation. After the 1960s, Brown argues, this narrative collapsed in the face of competing narratives, including those of individual self-fulfilment and personal freedom. This approach is echoed by others who, following Lyotard (1979), suggest a collapse of all 'grand narratives', including those which are presumed to be essential to religion.

The vagueness of the concept of 'discourse' can be both a strength and weakness of such approaches. Where discourse is narrowly interpreted, it may have the effect of reducing religion to language and to articulated statements, and so reinforcing a logocentric tendency which comes naturally to academics. In effect, this approach can easily return to the idea of religion as a set of articulated beliefs. On the other

hand, discourse is interpreted so broadly in Foucault's own work – to include institutionalized knowledges and practices, and the power relations they enshrine – that it has the potential to inform much richer conceptions of religion. In the hands of some writers it has led to a new sensibility to religion as power (for example, Asad 1993 and Mahmood 2005). An additional effect has been to draw more attention to neglected dimensions, spheres and locations of religion, including religious education, religion in the media, and religion in popular culture (see, for example, Starett's [1998] study of religious education and Islamic resurgence in Egypt).

Religion as ideology and mystification

Whilst a Marxist approach agrees that religion is primarily a matter of culture, it differs from the accounts discussed so far by viewing religion as a mystification which obscures the contradictions of social and economic life. As such, religion is both a symptom and a cause of alienation. It is an 'opiate' which ameliorates only by blinding its followers to the real conditions of life, and thereby inhibiting attempts to bring about change (e.g. Marx and Engels 1969). Despite being operationalized in some older studies of religion and society, such as Thompson's (1972) account of Methodism and the making of the English working classes, this account of religion as 'ideological' has become rare in more recent academic study, which has devoted more effort to showing how what might at first sight look like 'false consciousness' can, under closer scrutiny, be shown to be both rational and empowering, at least in its own terms (see, for example, Ammerman 1987, Davidman 1991, Mahmood 2005).

Religion as tradition and memory

Some approaches to religion as culture represent the latter as not essentially different from any other form of culture. Callum Brown, for example, has argued that the category of religion should be abolished in academic study, and the study of religion subsumed into the study of culture. Others, however, suggest that religion is a special *kind* of culture, by virtue of some distinctive characteristic(s) or function(s), such as its encompassing scope, or its anchoring, motivating or orienting qualities. A different approach to distinctiveness is offered by those who present religion as a matter of tradition, with a defining ability to make the past come to life in the present. Halbwach's (1992) recognition of the importance of collective memory in shaping present social reality has been revived, and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1993) has presented an account of religion as a 'chain of memory', an approach taken up by Grace Davie (2002) in her study of religion and change in Europe.

Religion as identity

Religion as community-creating and boundary-forming

The idea that religion is first and foremost a matter of the creation and maintenance of social bonds – rather than primarily a matter of belief or culture – is most closely associated in sociological tradition with the work of Émile Durkheim. For Durkheim (2001), religion and society are inseparable. Religion is the place where a society holds up an image of itself, reaffirms its bonds, renews its emotional ties, marks its

boundaries, sets itself apart – and so brings itself into being. In Durkheim's famous definition, religion names the 'beliefs and practices' relative to what is sacred and 'set apart' which unite into a 'single community' those who adhere to them.

This concept of religion has, however, remained somewhat marginal in the sociology of religion. It has been criticized as narrowly 'functionalist', as too broad and vague to operationalize empirically (what would *not* count as religious?), and as ethnocentric (not all societies draw a dualistic distinction between realms of the sacred and profane). Theorists of secularization such as Bryan Wilson (1988) and Steve Bruce (1996, 2000, 2002) take it seriously not so much as an account of religion *today*, but as account of what was lost in the course of modernization. For them, the breakdown of local ties of solidarity helps explain what they take to be the decline of religion in the West: as societies modernize, the forces of societalization and differentiation corrode local bonds and in the process seal the fate of religion.

The Durkheimian approach to religion has, however, had a more enduring influence in the anthropological and modern historical concepts of religion. It has inspired much anthropological analysis, including that which focuses on social developments in contemporary societies. Thus David Lehmann (2009), for example, analyses global and globalizing forms of religion in terms of the different ways in which they break and re-form social bonds and boundaries, and Timothy Jenkins's (1999) studies of English congregational life also pay close attention to the ways in which religions maintain past and present social boundaries and connections. Social history has also been interested in the links between religion and the creation and maintenance of socio-cultural communities, particularly those divided along confessional and denominational lines. The 'pillarization' of religion in the Netherlands; the divisions of Protestant and Catholic in Germany, Scotland, Quebec and elsewhere; the ability of religion to create social, economic, cultural and politically differentiated communities; and the way in which the collapse of such communities after the 1960s led directly to secularization, have all been subject to historical analysis.⁴

Religion as identity-claim

One of the few modern sociologists of religion to develop a concept of religion as identity was Hans Mol, who, in *Identity and the Sacred* (1976), proposed an account which owed something to Durkheim, but which offered a somewhat more individualized, psychological, account of identity. For Mol, a sense of identity is a basic anthropological need, which it is religion's prime function to satisfy (whereas for Durkheim, social rather than individual functioning is the focus). Although Mol's work did not prove widely influential, the idea that religion is first and foremost a matter of identity has become much more popular in recent work on religion, including that of political and social theorists. This represents the application to religion of the currently popular concept of 'identity' and 'identity politics', which derives from a network of academic and non-academic sources, including the sociology of individualization (e.g. Anthony Giddens's work on individualization and identity politics), ethnicity studies, gender studies, and theories of multiculturalism. The notion is also influenced by psychological theories of individuation, by marketing and consumer practices, and by a new social and

cultural diversity produced by improved communications and mobility and increased migration and diasporic settlement.

Although notoriously vague (see the critique by Brubaker and Cooper (2000)), the term 'identity' is therefore ready to hand for those who wish to make sense of recent religious developments. The concept of 'religious identity' is often used not just for descriptive but for explanatory purposes as, for example, when it is said that the increasing visibility of religion in even supposedly secular Europe has to do with a reassertion of religious identity, or when Muslims are said to be asserting their identity in the face of secularism. The assumption seems to be that there is a need for individuals and groups to define who they are (their 'identity'), and that this is done by asserting both 'sameness' and 'difference' – a matter of both identification and dis-identification. This imperative is often assumed to be greater in the conditions of 'postmodern' hyperdiversity, and in highly individualized societies. On this account religion may be treated as a source of identity like ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc., and hence as being both a matter of social ascription and of personal choice (in how one appropriates and 'performs' that identity). Its function in creating and sustaining society and communities, as in a Durkheimian account, is of lesser concern, as is the issue of how such claims might serve to empower those who make them (see the section on 'religion as power' below).

Religion as organizational belonging

If Durkheim's concept of religion as identity is the broadest, and recent social theory's concept of religion as identity somewhat narrower, the narrowest of all is found in work which assumes that being religious is primarily a matter of organizational belonging. Yet along with a focus on religion as doctrinal belief, this concept has dominated much sociology of religion, particularly in Europe. This is most evident in the way in which scholars preoccupied with measuring religion have taken levels of church membership, attendance, adherence and affiliation as their primary indicators. Each of these criteria is slightly different: membership has to do with formal belonging to a church, attendance with presence at worship services, adherence and affiliation with self-designated identity and commitment (for example, answering 'yes' to a survey question which asks whether 'you are' religious, Christian, Methodist, Muslim etc.).⁵ The assumption behind this whole approach is that religion is primarily a matter of incorporation in a designated religious institution.

As noted above, Luckmann critiques this approach for taking the historically contingent nature of church-based Christianity to be normative for all religion. He also notes the implicit influence of a positivistic – or, more precisely, behaviourist – conviction that observable behaviours are the only proper object of scientific scrutiny (in contrast to the unknowable 'black box' of human subjectivity). The close connection between this concept of religion and theories of secularization can also be noted. Defenders of these theories argue that church decline is the best indicator of religious collapse. Critics argue that church decline is only a measure of the decline of a very particular type of religious commitment (to regular worship services in a congregational setting), and that it ignores broader forms of religious change (from church religion to less hierarchically controlled forms of religion, for example), and neglects religions other than Christianity in the west.

Religion as relationship

Religion as social relations

The concept of religion as social relations has some overlap with a concept of religion as (social) identity. For both, religion serves to bind people together in particular ways. Where they differ, however, is that where religion is viewed as relational, the focus of interest is on inter-relations between religious persons, rather than intra-relations between different religious (and secular) individuals, groups and communities. Thus attention is directed more to interconnections and networks than differences and boundaries, and what is of greater concern than how religion defines identity is how it relates people together, what gains and costs are involved, how they are distributed, and how they relate to other form of social relation and stratification.

Small-scale case studies of religious groups, organizations, institutions, and local networks often focus on their characteristic forms of social relation. The tradition of community and locality studies, such as that exemplified by the Lynd's study of *Middletown* (Lynd and Lynd 1929), and the British tradition of community studies (see Guest *et al.* 2004 for an overview of the latter), provides an example. Such studies are broader than most congregational studies, since they are interested not so much in social relations within religious institutions such as churches, but in how religious relations correlate with wider social relations in the community, particularly class, and the ways they were changing under the pressures of industrial modernization. The more recent tradition of congregational studies (see Woodhead *et al.* 2004 for an introduction), has tended to narrow its focus to relations within particular congregations. A number of recent studies of women in evangelical congregations and networks exemplify this approach. They are concerned to show how religion offers women supportive networks with other women, as well as a complex of relations with male congregants, husbands, and male church leaders (e.g. Griffith 1997, Brasher 1998). More unusually, such studies focus on conflictual relations within congregations and how these are negotiated (e.g. Becker 1999). Marler (1995) has analysed how social relations within congregations imitate and substitute for particular patterns of familial relations (particular an idealized 1950s nuclear family), while Ammerman (1997a) relates social relations within a cross section of American congregations to wider social networks in their immediate neighbourhoods.

Some located studies of religious *change* also employ a concept of religion as social relations to explore how religious belongings, and conversion and switching, may be related to wider social changes. For example, David Martin's (1990) study of Pentecostalism in Latin America explains the growth of Charismatic Christianity in terms of its ability to support the transition from rural to urban locations, and from rural to capitalist modes of production. Not only does it support severance of ties with old forms of social and familial relation (and ancestral and local deities), but it supplies new religious social structures and relations which provide material and emotional support in often harsh new conditions of life. Burdick's (1996) study *Looking for God in Brazil* uses the metaphor of a religious marketplace to guide his study of religio-social relations in a single locality, and to examine how religious affiliation, switching, and multiple-affiliation are related to wider patterns of religious and wider social relations (as noted below, however, market-oriented studies more often treat religion as a consumer *resource* than as a form of social relation).

These forms of located study have recently been disrupted and enriched by growing interest in movement as well as in stability, and in religious relations which extend across local and national boundaries. Above all, migration studies have cross-fertilized with studies of religion to investigate both how religious relations serve to connect migrants and settlers to communities in their new place of residence, link them within transnational religious networks, and preserve their connections to communities of origin and heritage (see, for example, Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 2006).

Religion as super-social relations

Although interested in social relations, sociology – including the sociology of religion – has in practice drawn a sharp line between social relations between living human beings and social relations with ancestors, gods, God and other ‘supernatural’ beings. Whereas the former are considered proper objects of study, the latter are not. The rationale is that social science is best equipped to deal with empirically observable social relations.

That defence ignores the fact that relations with ‘non-empirical’ beings are often important in social life, and that such relations are accessible insofar as they are culturally and symbolically mediated (whether we are speaking of a relation with a dead relative, the glorious dead of a war, an iconic fictional character, an evil spirit, or the Christian God). Anthropology has been willing to pay much greater attention to super-social relations, following examples like E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1965) classic study of the life world of the Nuer. Some anthropologists argue that refusal to deal with the full network of human relations represents an imposition of unexamined secularist sensibilities. Thus Klass (1995) maintains that the natural–supernatural distinction is a modern, scientific and ethnocentric imposition on other cultures and historical eras. Who is to say that some things are ‘natural’ and others are not? For a farmer in Trinidad, he argues, the *di* (spirit of the field, spirit of the person who first cultivated the field) is just as important and real, and not categorically different, from the landlord. Both must be given offerings and treated with respect. Both are beings the farmer has never met, who form part of the network of everyday social relations in which he engages, and who demand offerings. In a sense, the notion of a landlord, depending on a whole set of ideological assumptions which could easily disappear, is the more fragile and incredible. Klass’s conclusion is that if we wish to understand the farmer’s religion, we must take him on his own terms, and avoid imposing liberal institutionalized skepticism upon his social world.

A broadly phenomenological approach, which brackets out questions of the truth or falsity of what is studied, and some social historical approaches, have also contributed to a fuller understanding of super-social relations in particular settings. For example, Bob Orsi’s (e.g. Orsi 2005) studies of the practices of Catholics, for example, illuminate the world of saintly, angelic, and divine beings which they inhabit. And Peter Brown’s studies of early Christianity tease out the ways in which relations with super-empirical beings map onto social and material relations in the everyday world, and can serve to subvert and change the latter, as well as to consolidate new patterns and privileges (e.g. Brown 1990). Similarly, David Nicholl’s (1989) studies of religion in modern and early modern Britain tease out the relations

between conceptions of the state and sovereign political power, and ideas of divinity. All take as their data articulated beliefs, emotions, bodily practices and material symbols and, as such, also develop the concept of religion as practice (see below).

Religion as experience

The idea that religion is a distinct kind of experience, as argued by Rudolph Otto (1931) for example, falls outside the scope of this discussion, given that it is resolutely non-sociological. The social sciences would deny that there is any pure experience unmediated by culture and society. They generally maintain that attempts to locate religion in a distinctive kind of experience, and to use means such as neurological imaging to detect such experience, rests on a misunderstanding of the inherently relational nature of all experience. This does not, however, mean that social science must deny the importance of personal religious experience altogether, since it is possible to develop fully social accounts of such experience. For example, Riis and Woodhead (2010) stress the importance of emotions in religious life, but argue that emotional experience is generated in the interrelations between agents, cultural symbols, and society. On this sort of account, religious experience is not a distinct kind of experience, but can be any experience – from grief to joy – which takes place in the socio-symbolic setting of a religious regime.

Religion as practice

Religion as ritual and embodiment

The ethnographic approach characteristic of anthropological study also lends itself to an awareness of religion as practice – as something which is lived out (or ‘danced out’ as R.R. Marrett [1914, p. xxxi] famously put it), as much as thought out or written out. The concept of religion as ritual is found in many anthropological accounts, and although the debate about what is meant by ritual is extensive and ongoing, certain features including the social patterning of embodied human action, and the training of attention upon certain focal points of the ritual, are often found. Thus ritual is said to engage individuals in orchestrated and formalized social performances, serving to co-ordinate bodily movements in synchronized and harmonious ways which may have the effect of reinforcing and intensifying certain emotions and commitments and banishing others. As Jonathan Z. Smith (1988) puts it, ritual serves as a ‘focusing lens’ creating what is in effect a ‘controlled environment’ which can simplify and concentrate the confusions of everyday experience by focusing attention on what really matters and how one should feel about it.

Rather than viewing ritual as simply one element of religion, some approaches to religion – following a Durkheimian lead – identify ritual with religion and/or society itself (e.g. Rappaport 1999). Others take a somewhat more skeptical view, noting how the category can be used in both academic study and everyday life to valorize certain forms of ‘real’ religion and stigmatize others. Thus Katherine Bell (1997) argues that it is more helpful to think in terms of ‘ritualization’ than to view ritual as a fixed category assigned a special place in social life. Rather than concentrate too exclusively on the emotional power of orchestrated, usually male-led, ritual practices,

she urges that it is important, for example, to take more account of domestic and intimate practices which are often not recognized as ritual at all, but which may have profound significance for participants.

Religion as quotidian practice

The latter point is taken up by some recent sociologists of religion, who have argued for an expansion of the concept of religion to include what some call 'lived religion' (e.g. Hall 1997), and others call 'everyday religion' (e.g. Ammerman 2007). Most advocates of this approach are insistent that they are *not* calling for attention to 'popular' as opposed to 'elite' religion (e.g. Orsi 1997). Nor are they simply saying that religion is simply a matter of beliefs and texts, but rather that such religious authorities only become real when embodied and lived out in actual social contexts and circumstances. As Orsi [1997, p. 9] puts it, the proper object of interest is 'religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience ... in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners, by real men and women in situations and relationships they have made and that have made them'.

This concept of religion is part of an approach which seeks to broaden the purview of sociological study to take account of what has often been ignored. Thus it is less interested in formal theologies and religious structures *per se* than in their relations with religious practices in 'everyday' life, which includes domestic, familial and leisure settings, as well as designated religious settings. It is also less interested in religion at societal level (e.g. religion and politics, religion and legal regulation), than in religion in micro-level interactions. As such, the concept of religion as quotidian practice tends to go along with an ethnographic, participant observer approach, which involves deep immersion in particular spaces of social life. It is also adaptable to the emphasis on popular 'discourse' characteristic of cultural studies. However, the concept of religion as quotidian practice puts more emphasis on the fact that religion may never be formally, textually, articulated at all, but operates at the level of habitual practices and the regulation of emotions (e.g. McGuire 2008). McGuire (1988) points out the many different meanings drawn on by practitioners of ritual healing in suburban America, and shows that their logical incompatibility is irrelevant given the way they hold together in embodied, emotional practice.

'Popular' or 'folk' religion

The study of 'folk religion' and 'folkways' characteristic of some European and American scholarly traditions recognized that the concept of religion implicit in a lot of scholarly study of religion gave undue emphasis to 'elite' religion, and to 'great' as opposed to 'little' religious traditions, and that it had a bias towards the literate rather than the oral, and belief rather than practice. A different tradition, influenced by a Marxist approach, paid more attention to 'popular' or 'ordinary' religion and what had previously been characterized as 'superstition', often in the course of looking at working-class 'communities' (e.g. Abercrombie *et al.* 1970). As such, both approaches tried to capture something which they believed to be in danger of disappearing. As mentioned above, these approaches have come under fire recently for a purported failure to appreciate the dialectical relations between 'official' and

‘unofficial’ religion, for an implicit nostalgic romanticization of pre-industrial ‘folk’ religion, and working-class ‘popular’ religion, and for a tendency to ignore the ongoing, dynamic nature of religion and its ability to adapt to the conditions of modern and late modern societies. Nevertheless, insights and methods pioneered by these approaches have been taken up into the current study of ‘lived’ and ‘practised’ religion.

Religion as power

The concept of religion as power has been neglected in recent times, not least because of the influence of secularization theories which emphasized religion’s loss of social power. Yet power lies at the heart of religion, which typically offers relationship with some form of higher power or powers which can be drawn down into the mundane world. Religion indicates where power really lies (in forces of both good and evil), and allows people to enter into relation with it by understanding it, revering it, worshipping it, appeasing it, drawing upon it, manipulating it, railing against it, meditating upon it, making offerings to it, and falling in love with it. Thus the transcendent powers at the centre of religion are often referred to in terms of power and energy, such as *dunamis*, *mana*, *orenda*, *charisma*, or *chi*, divine power is hedged with prohibitions, and certain individuals are designated as better qualified to engage closely with it than others. Religious institutions and elites, themselves empowered by virtue of an acknowledged relation to higher powers, also exercise significant this-worldly power over their own followers and adherents, and within society more widely. Far from being an alternative to the other concepts of religion reviewed so far, the concept of religion as power can be seen to be complementary: expanding their reach, and adding to their content and utility.

Religion as ‘compensator’ and ‘capital’

Two contemporary accounts of religion as power both owe something to exchange theory, and both draw on economic metaphors of ‘reward’ and ‘compensation’ on the one hand, and ‘capital’ on the other. They represent religion as a resource which may be exchanged by individuals, and which has instrumental uses.

First, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) propose a concept of religion which has to do with this-worldly rewards and – more importantly – other-worldly ‘compensators’. On this account, religions are ‘human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions’, and ‘a compensator is the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be immediately verified’ (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 8, 6). As such, religions are likely to have maximum salience for those denied worldly power, but they are also of wider significance insofar as they promise to satisfy human desires of such scope and intensity (such as desire for immortality) that other institutions cannot easily compete. Although offering only a restricted and ‘thin’ account of religious power, this approach has proved fruitful in stimulating the lively field of ‘Rational Choice Theory’, through which it has influenced the sociology of religion more generally.

A second body of theory, deriving from the work of Bourdieu, and popularized in the Anglophone world by Robert Putnam, has promoted the idea that religion is

powerful by virtue of its ability to foster ‘social capital’. For Bourdieu (1977) social capital refers to the fact that social connections and networks represent a resource for those liked by them – but by the same token serve to reproduce privilege and inequality. Putnam (2000) is much more positive about social capital, which he regards as foundational to civic virtue and communal health. His suggestion that religion is a rich source of social capital has been enthusiastically taken up by some scholars of religion and has influenced social policy and applied social theory. There are currently a number of research projects attempting to gauge the extent to which religions produce both ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ capital. An assumption tends to be that if this can be done, it will demonstrate the social significance of religion, at least in relation to civil society.

Religious resources

A different and much older trajectory of analysis, stemming from Max Weber, stresses the essentially cultural or ideological nature of religious power. In analysing social power at the macro-level, for example, Mann (1986, 1993) and Poggi (2001) consider how different kinds of social power derive from the different resources they seek to monopolize, and suggest that political power is backed by physical force, economic power by material resources and their distribution, and religious power by its provision of, first, meaning (including ultimate metaphysical schemes of understanding and classification), second, normativity, and third, sacred symbols reinforced by collective sentiment which solidify and communicate meaning and value (e.g. Poggi 2001, pp. 60–61). This analysis can be extended under the influence of Durkheim by taking account of the power of religious ritual. Ritual gatherings may serve to co-ordinate individual actions, generate powerfully motivating and solidaristic emotions, overcome fear and doubt, and regularly renew bonds and sentiments. As noted above, they focus attention and devotion upon sacred symbols and foci, including living human beings, bypass the need for intellectual debates and agreement, and are able to produce what Kertzer (1988, p. 67) calls ‘solidarity without consensus’.

Under the influence of social movement theory, some scholars go further still by drawing attention not only to the cultural, ‘framing’ capacity of religion, but to its organizational resources (e.g. Nepstad and Williams 2007). As Gramsci (1991) recognized, religion can contribute to the emergence of counter-hegemonic ideologies because religious groups are semi-autonomous from other social institutions and create a free space where alternative perspectives can be discussed (Billings 1990). Religions often have material resources, such as buildings, which offer the physical means for assembling, debating, and organizing. They also have trained leaders, who may command a good deal of authority (Nepstad and Williams 2007, p. 421), not only if they are charismatic figures in a Weberian sense. They are used to bringing people together in mass gatherings. Some have extensive, often global, networks, and can call on resources and support from beyond the local or even national level. All these factors were important, for example, in making Christianity a vital resource in the mobilization of opposition to communism in eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and in opposition to tyrannical regimes in Latin America.

Religion, economic and political power

However otherworldly it may be in its symbolic references, religious power is not insulated from forms of worldly power. In reaction to a form of Marxism which stressed material conditions of production as the only engine of social change, Weber pointed out that far from being a mere ideological reflection of economic conditions, religion had played an active role in the rise of capitalism in Protestant parts of Europe (1904–5/1996). Although he did not argue that religion caused capitalism, Weber credited religious beliefs with the power to propel economic change through motivating individuals to engage in highly moralized forms of action which had the unintended consequence of energizing and legitimating capitalist production and capital accumulation.

As with the economy, so with politics, Weber regarded religion as largely a motivating and legitimating force, whose significance lay in its ability to uphold the status quo, rather than to drive social change. However, Weber's discussion of charismatic authority also reveals his awareness of religion's capacity to challenge traditional forms of authority, at least in exceptional circumstances. Troeltsch (1931) had also explored the way in which the social teachings of the 'church' type of Christianity endorsed rather than challenged the economic and political structures of the societies in which they were located. But he was also aware of the very different 'sectarian' type of Christianity which opposed worldly institutions to those of the Gospel, and was embodied in communities of the 'saints' who sought to live perfect lives apart from the distractions of the world.

Influenced by Weber and Troeltsch, the capacity of religion to retard or propel political change, and the conditions under which it does so, were analysed by J. Milton Yinger in *Religion in the Struggle for Power* (1946). He argued that religion was constantly torn between a pure religious interest and loyalty, and worldly interests and influence. He suggested that even the most worldly 'church' form of Christianity retains a more radical 'sectarian' element, and that religion is most powerful as a force of change when both tendencies are combined (the motive force of the sect, and the organizational power and reach of the church). Even though religion rarely succeeds in overturning a socio-political order, especially in modern societies, Yinger believed that it retains the power to affect political reform and amelioration of social conditions.

Some recent analyses of religious influence in late modern societies echo Lipton's observations about religion's ability to critique the market and the state, though more as an actor in civil society than in formal relations with modern, often secular states (e.g. Casanova 1994). A number of recent case studies have advanced understanding of religion as a political force, including studies of Christianity's influence in bringing about change in Latin America (e.g. Berryman 1994) and Eastern Europe (e.g. Kubik 1994); studies of the political significance of Islamic movements (e.g. Abu-Amr 1994, Nasr 1994); and reflection on the significance of alternative spiritualities such as neo-paganism, in campaigning for political change, particularly in relation to the environment (e.g. Lynch 2007, Woodhead 2010c). Recent studies of partnerships between governments and 'faith' communities in, for example, the provision of development aid, welfare services, and in counter-terrorism activities (e.g. Dinham 2009) reveal a new form of emerging state–religion relationship.

Religion as status and recognition

Power has to do with *capacity*: the ability to act, to make, to do, whereas status has more to do with social recognition and the standing and sense of worth it confers. The former is more about doing, the latter more about being – though status often confers power, and power often confers status. Both are relational: a person or group only has power or status in relation to others.

Although there has been far more discussion of religion as power than religion as status, the latter deserves fuller consideration. Analysis which explains religious developments in terms of the assertion of ‘identity’, for example, can be deepened by consideration of how it also confers status. For example, the attraction of holistic spirituality to women can be explained in terms of the way in which it provides an interpersonal setting in which women’s ‘issues’ which are otherwise dismissed, ignored or downplayed can receive proper recognition and treatment (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). Likewise, the practice of young Muslim women in Europe wearing *hijab* and *niqab* can be analysed not just as the assertion of Muslim identity in the face of perceived Islamophobia, but as an attempt to win recognition for a form of identity which is self-defined rather than imposed by the majority society.

Religious power and status at micro-, meso- and macro-levels

The concept of religion as power can refer to religion at different social scales. At the micro-level, the concept draws attention to religion as a form of personal and interpersonal empowerment or disempowerment. An example would be when a woman who employs the services of a spiritual healer is empowered through the process, or where a personal claim to charismatic inspiration is denied by a pastor.

At the meso-level, religious power has to do with the power of religious organizations and institutions, and analysis at this level may consider their internal power-relations and their power-relations with other religious and non-religious institutions. Analysis may focus, for example, on power struggles within an institution (e.g. Becker 1999), or on the power of clerical elites and how they strive to maintain it (a neglected area of study). It may also consider how different religious organizations compete for scarce resources such as state recognition and funding, or for conversions. The latter kind of analysis has been stimulated by the metaphor of the spiritual ‘marketplace’ in which different ‘suppliers’ offering varied forms of spiritual ‘goods’ compete for clients and customers, and seek to occupy niches and establish monopolies.

At the macro-level, studies of religion as power consider religious power as one form, field or domain of social power in relation to others (for example, Weberian analyses distinguish economic, political, military and cultural/religious power). Some scholars investigate how these different forms of power seek to co-opt one another, or at least co-operate (as in Weber’s discussion of religion and capitalism). More common in relation to religion in late modern society is study of how religion is constrained by other power domains, including state and legal regulation, and how it tries to minimize the restraints and maximize the opportunities (e.g. Beckford and Richardson 2007).

Sociologists and social historians have also considered how structures of religious power relate to other power structures in society, including the structured inequalities

of gender, class, age, and ethnicity. For example, there are longstanding debates about religion's alliance with class and party politics, and about its differential appeal to different classes (e.g. McLeod 2007), and equally longstanding debates about religion's relation to gender differences – whether as a legitimating or subversive force (e.g. Brown 2000). Some of these debates are tied into wider debates about the causes of secularization, with debate currently divided between those who see lower-class alienation from religion as the most important factor, and those who argue that a growing alienation of women from the churches in the late modern period has been more important. The stimulus provided by the work of Foucault to look at power in everyday interactions, regimes of knowledge, and internalized and embodied norms, evident in Brown's work, holds out further promise for studies of religion as power.

Conclusion

Rather than responding to criticisms of the concept of religion by abandoning the term, the starting-point of this paper is the belief that it is more fruitful for scholars of religion to become critically aware of the scope, variety and contingency of the term and its uses – and so better able to justify and critique their own conceptual choices.

In reviewing five different concepts of religion the intention has not been to commend or reject a single one. A particular concept or combination of concepts may be appropriate for a particular study, given its empirical scope, theoretical framework, methods and resources.⁶ All five concepts are needed for a full and rounded study of religion. Very often the use of one concept assumes, or opens up to, one or more of the others. For example, the concept of religion as belief may lead to consideration of how a particular cluster of beliefs serves to empower those who uphold them, and the study of religion as sacred values may lead to an awareness of how identity crystallizes around such shared commitments, and how some groups and individuals are empowered – and others disempowered – in the process. Even in combination these five concepts do not exhaust the possibilities for the study of religion. New concepts may arise in response to new data, new forms of religion, new theoretical approaches, and new interests.

Any research project is holistic in the sense that it combines conceptual, theoretical, methodological and epistemological elements, and explicit or implicit normative commitments, with each element affecting every other. Successful research design manages to blend the elements in a harmonious way. To do so requires sensitive and critical awareness of the elements which are at play, but the conceptual element – and its implicit normative assumptions – is often the most neglected. This paper is intended as a provocation to look more closely – and more broadly – at the conceptual dimension of social scientific studies of religion. It also contains an implicit plea to allow empirical findings enough scope to shape, to revise, the concept of religion employed in a particular study. The underlying epistemology of this discussion is therefore neither realist nor constructivist. Rather, it maintains that concepts structure our findings, but do not wholly determine them, and are always subject to revision in the light of those findings. Careful research and analysis is needed to confirm what counts as religion in a particular context, and in what ways. Any concept of religion is dangerous if it is used as a shortcut or alternative to genuine investigation. Thus our concepts are necessary to direct our focus and our research, but our research must constantly reshape and revise our concepts.

Notes

1. This paper represents the development of an earlier work, a chapter written for Hugh McLeod's festschrift, *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Woodhead 2010b), which considered four implicit models of religion in social scientific study and in the work of Hugh McLeod (religion as belief, identity, value-commitment, and power).
2. As Toumey (1994, p. 261) says of creationism, it makes scriptural stories 'as tangible as test tubes. This way, the grace of scientific sanctification enhances the scriptural basis of conservative morality'.
3. McLeod (1997, p. 143) reports a student at the LSE in 1968 commenting: 'The fact that you were morally superior mattered, people were making a life choice at some level or another. The breaking up of the old world and the searching for a new had some apocalyptic element to it'.
4. For example, McLeod (2007, pp. 73–79) traces a breakdown of religiously based community belonging after the 1960s to a number of different factors which, cumulatively, led to a shift whereby identity was constituted not so much by membership of religion, class, community and party, but by personal choices, achievements and multiple voluntary commitments. He considers the most important factors to be: first, the blurring of ideological boundaries was precipitated by churches and political parties (including Christian parties) trying to win wider support, second, growing tolerance and willingness to compromise, linked with the growing power of a 'new middle class' including academics, social workers and journalists, who rejected clerical privilege and sought a more liberal, pluralistic political establishment, and third, growing affluence which made church-based local support networks less important, opened up more opportunities, and resulted in greater mobility.
5. Adherence is the vaguest and most contested of these items. For a discussion and defence of its meaning and use see Bouma (1992), Fane (1999) and Francis (2008).
6. For this reason, definitions of religion often combine two or more concepts, as in James G. Frazer's famous statement that 'religion consists of two elements ... a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them' (1922, p. 58). Attempts to outline the different 'dimensions' of religion (e.g. Glock 1959, refined by Stark and Glock 1968) imply a similar awareness, but are often unclear about whether they take 'religion' to be a multifaceted phenomenon which always displays these elements, or whether they take 'religion' to be a hermeneutic tool which can draw attention to different aspects of social life.

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