



Intro To Religion

Many phenomena are too amorphous and evanescent to be reduced to a discrete concept or captured by ink on paper. Some phenomena, we find, are far too complex to be distilled in exposition without resorting to oversimplification. Such phenomena are so variegated and multi-faceted that any critical analysis of them would invariably resort to dubious caricatures.

Though such caricatures are often used with religion (in disingenuous depictions either for or against), this need not be the case with religion qua cult activity. After all, we must describe X accurately (calling a spade a spade) before we can proceed with either apologetics or indictments regarding X. If we haven't defined what we're talking about, then making judgments amount only to promoting or disparaging a buzz-term—then using anecdotes to suit that judgment.

Religion, of course, IS quite complex and multifaceted. It is a variegated phenomenon that manifests itself in a diverse number of ways. Such apparent obstacles have dissuaded all but a few people from engaging in any frank critique of religion. This reticence can be attributed to mental laziness and to fear.

The laziness amounts to obstinately insisting that nobody could ever possible encapsulate religion in a definition...that just won't ever be able to "put our finger on" what we're trying to talk about. So just leave it alone, let it be, and move on to something else that's more conducive to critical analysis. This laziness may, in part, derive from cowardice.

The fear is that candor comes off as untoward or impolitic. Indeed, in order to effectively engage in such a critique, taboos must be disregarded, political correctness jettisoned, etiquette breached, and sensibilities injured. To this, the only responsible response can be: So be it. Whenever there is tremendous emotional investment in X, whenever X is subjected to critical analysis, feathers will be ruffled, apple carts will be upset, and egos will be bruised. Such is life.

One of the problems seems to be a lack of consensus as to what the phenomenon in question actually is. The terms "religion" and "cult" not only MEAN different things to different people, but that which each labels ENTAILS different things to different people. It is, admittedly, sometimes difficult to disentangle what something IS with what it ENTAILS. Doesn't one simply follow from the other?

This all becomes especially complicated once we discover how emotionally loaded these terms are. The Church of Christ, for example, insists that it is not (merely) a “religion”... while the Church of Scientology demands to be considered a full-fledged “religion”—and not (merely) a “cult”. What’s going on here? The labyrinthine taxonomy seems untenable. These people over here DON’T want to be considered a religion, while those people over there PINE to be considered a religion. Are they using the word in the same way?

So I have taken great care to DEFINE that which I aim to critique. In brief, when I say “religion” or “cult activity”, I mean the same thing: systematized / institutionalized dogmas / dogmatism. This is something that, by nature, involves some kind of groupthink (collective thought) and shared experience (collective behavior). That, however one may think of it, is what I’m talking about—no more, no less. If something qualifies under that definition, then that is what I’m referring to; if something does not qualify, then it is something other than what I’m referring to. Period. What this ENTAILS—a different issue—is outlined in the following essays. Regardless of my conclusions, the point of departure is unproblematic: the definition of that which I’m discussing.

This section on “religion”, then, starts with a thorough definition of religion. Convoluting conceptions based on general gist, vague notion, stigma, stereotype, or general / personal impression are thereby avoided. Specious debates are therefore precluded.

A few preliminary comments:

Quibbling about some chimerical distinction between “organized” religion (which is institutional in nature) and “personalized” religion (the sense in which the term was used by, say, William James) is pointless. Such a distinction is rendered a moot point once we define what we’re talking about. If a belief system / or mode of spirituality is entirely personalized, then it is not a matter of religion (though it could be influenced by ambient religion).

ALL religion is, BY DEFINITION, organized in some way, to a minimal degree. UN- or DIS-organized religion is only possible up to a point, past which it ceases to be religion at all...and ends up becoming a hodge-podge of dogmas, ad hoc superstitions, urban legends, transient pseudo-rituals, and personalized spiritual

excursions...all of which are quite commonplace in non-religious contexts. So when I say something about “religion”, I’m not necessarily saying something about those other things.

Quibbling about some illusory distinction between a “religion” and a “cult” is also precluded by a proper definition of the subject matter. In Frege-ian terms, each word has the same referent, but a different sense. The former is typically a label applied to instances of the phenomenon that have come to be widely accepted by society-at-large. The latter applies to instances when it has not. But this status isn’t endemic to the phenomenon in question.

If there is religion, there is—by definition—cult activity. If there is cult activity, then—by definition—we are dealing with religion. One way a distinction is often made: The former alludes to something that one need not be mentally unstable to partake in, whereas the latter alludes to something that requires some degree of mental instability. Such a categorization amounts to: “religion” if I approve of it and “cult” if I disapprove of it. This labeling scheme is all fine and dandy, but is more a reflection of one’s personal values / interests, not the result of a logically rigorous analysis. (I could just as easily define “food” as only the things I personally like to eat...or only the things I think people should eat.)

Another distinction that has been put forth (e.g. by Michael Shermer) is that “cult” alludes to a religion where the founder is still living, while “cult” alludes to cult activity that has managed to carry on after the founder has died. This is a perfectly sensible taxonomy, but—as far as my inquiry is concerned—a moot point. It would lead to very unhelpful taxonomies, as it is based on criteria regarding ambient conditions, not the phenomenon itself. In this taxonomy, Juche was a “cult” until Kim Il Sung died; then it “became” a religion. Mormonism was a “cult” until Joseph Smith died, at which point it transitioned to “religion”. But what is such a distinction getting at? “Staying power” after the founder dies is an interesting thing to study, but it seems to miss what the thing IS that is or is NOT persisting. (This point seems to be based on Max Weber’s reference to ritual ossification of a cult after it manages to survive the death of its charismatic founder. See his *The Sociology of Religion*. On this point, Weber surely would have found L. Ron Hubbard a mesmerizing case study.) But other examples demonstrate that this distinction misses the point (e.g. “The Base” after OBL was killed, the KKK following the death of its various “founders” and “re-founders”, the Moonies after Sun Yung Moon’s death, Scientology after L. Ron Hubbard’s death, etc.)

There have been other religion-cult distinctions as well, having to do with getting people to pay money (or not), being extremely insular (or not), altering peoples' entire personality (or not), etc. Such criteria, while interesting for OTHER reasons, involve specious excursions in hairsplitting: it's always just a matter of degree. When it comes to discussing religion, all relevant phenomena exhibit such characteristics. To categorize in this way, then, misses the point of the thing in question.

Religion-cult distinctions are all question-begging...and, at best, beside the point. So it is: religion is cult activity, and vice versa. Scientology was what it was the year before Hubbard died and the year after Hubbard died, even as it metastasized and adapted.

The phenomenon, "religion", is—by definition—collective in nature. If it is based purely on the individual, then it is not a religion; it is merely an instance of personal spirituality / beliefs. Conventionally, people tend to call it "insanity" (a psychosis or neurosis) when only one person does it; they call it a "cult" when between a few and a few thousand people do it; and they call it a "religion" when over 100,000 people partake in it together over a significant period of time (say, more than a generation). This is fine for pejorative purposes, but a serious enquiry must depend on more than just pejoratives.

Moreover, such a defective taxonomy is quantitatively based. There have been many exceptions to such dubious categories that have based on the aforesaid qualitative criteria. For example, most people in the world agree that Scientology is a "cult" (though tens of thousands of people in the world seem to be followers who don't like that rubric). Meanwhile, the G.O.P. certainly qualifies as a cult, even as it boasts millions of members who would NEVER see what they're engaged in as cult activity. The key is that the definition is based primarily on qualitative criteria, not quantitative criteria.

Once one understands the salient points of the definition, we find that even the world's biggest "religions" (e.g. Roman Catholicism) are cults every bit as much as, say, the People's Temple or the KKK. By the same token, the latter are every bit as much of a religion as Roman Catholicism.

When delineating a concept so as to establish the boundary conditions for a critique, it is important to select (prudent) necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifications. In doing so, one can make two basic kinds of mistakes here:

A One can define the thing so widely as to make the concept useless

(e.g. all objects with a mass of more than 1.2 kilograms that aren't cars)

B One can define the thing so inanely as to make the concept pointless

(e.g. all red objects that are both squishy and not currently located in Europe, but were located in Europe yesterday for between 3 and 5 minutes)

Of course, **A** and **B** type errors aren't mutually exclusive. In defining "religion" as I have, I've been accused of making a type **A** error. The claim is that I have defined the term so broadly as to render it spurious—and thus worthless in a critical analysis. Indeed, the definition encompasses otherwise seemingly disparate phenomena, such as Maoism, Stalinism, Nazism, Salafism, Revisionist Zionism, Hassidism, Pentecostalism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, the Red Cambodians, Scientology, Juche, the Republican Party, and the People's Temple. To some, the parameters involved seem to apply to so many different social movements as to make the concept useless—sociologically AND practically speaking.

But this objection only seems to have credence insofar as one fails to see that all such things are manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon...a phenomenon that begs to be defined. I'm fitting the definition to important parallels, not force-fitting an analysis to a conveniently-established definition. The definition, then, is based on salient features. Those who accuse me of a type A error are only doing so because the concept does not comport with their pre-established stigmas, stereotypes, etc.

If we constrain our definition of "religion" to things like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sufism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Baha'i, and Shinto, we have succumbed to the straight-jacket of "conventional wisdom". Here, "religion" is a pejorative, assigned according to social convention. Meanwhile, if we dismiss as "just a cult" things like Scientology, Branch Davidianism, Wicca, the KKK, Santeria, and Freemasonry, we're merely tailoring our concepts to prevailing (negative) stigmas. Either way, we are engaged in question-begging. Lastly, if we omit from our taxonomy such phenomena as Revisionist Zionism, the Republican Party, Stalinism, Maoism, Juche, and the Red Cambodians, we are forced to employ glaring double-standards in order to make a jury-rigged taxonomy seem workable. No critical analysis is worth much if it is based merely on stereotypes.

Put it this way: If Nazism wasn't a textbook "religion" / "cult", then what does the term even mean? In order to engage in a worthwhile critical analysis of a kind of phenomenon, one must first ascertain what it is to be the kind under scrutiny. Short of a concept that is determined by salient parameters, the analysis ends up being a commentary based on general gists and vague notions—the product of prevailing stigmas and common stereotypes.

Indeed, the point of delineating a concept is to distill an essence...doing so in a way that sheds light on things—that helps us understand our world more efficiently. As any scientist is aware, the aim of classification is to elucidate a common thread that is important to recognize amongst superficially different particulars. So we call some animals "mammals" and others "reptiles" for a good reason. The distinction is based on salient features, enabling us to make important and useful distinctions (distinctions that help us understand the universe in which we find ourselves).

In sociology, certain common threads are important simply because recognizing them allows us to diagnose and address societal dysfunctions. In this vein, it is important to see how, say, Maoism and the Republican Party are two brands of the same underlying phenomenon. They are, indeed, members of a "class" that is important to label. So label it we must. If anyone insists on putting these into two different compartments, then fine: one can contrive any taxonomy one wishes. But the question remains: Does one have GOOD REASONS to posit each category?

Religion, being a social phenomenon (i.e. involving humans), is not static; it is fluid. It is a dynamic: an on-going process. Consequently, each instance undergoes a perpetual metamorphosis—to various degrees in various ways, over time, depending on both internal transitions and the external forces impinging upon it. But the key is that each case involves continuity and internal coherence. It boasts sufficiently stable coherence and boundary conditions so that each case can be assigned a discrete identity. The same goes for ANY social phenomenon—indeed, for any institution—be it a marriage, a government, a social club, a university, a labor union, a corporation, a football team, or the NFL. Religion is no different in this respect. They may bifurcate or merge, faction or consolidate, but there is always something identifiable at hand.



Upon surveying instances of institutionalized dogmatism (wherein groupthink plays an integral role), it tends to be the most salient features of each instance that all of them have in common. We would therefore be well advised to identify those features so that we can take note of them when they arise in new contexts. Any worthwhile definition of “religion”, then, encompasses all such things: no more, and no less.