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# Rethinking Religion: A Critical-Historical Analysis of the Western Construction and Its Non-Western Negotiations

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| Keywords | Abstract |
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| *Religion, Critical-Historical, Western Construction.* | *The concept of religion as it is globally understood today is a modern Western construction that is not universal. Nevertheless, it has been widely applied to non-Western cultures without adequate consideration of their historical and epistemological contexts. The singular category of "world religions" often oversimplifies highly diverse belief systems and generates epistemic bias, as seen in the labeling of Buddhism in Japan and Hinduism in India. This study aims to examine the conceptual origins of religion as a Western category, trace its application within colonial contexts, and analyze how non-Western cultures respond to the dominance of this definition. The research employs a critical qualitative approach through a historical-critical literature review and critical discourse analysis, framed by social constructionist and postcolonial theories. Japan and India are purposively selected as case studies. The findings reveal that non-Western societies are not merely passive recipients of the Western category of religion, but actively engage in resistance, adaptation, and the reconstruction of meaning based on their local contexts. This research affirms that religion is not a neutral or universal concept, but a historically and politically produced category that is continuously negotiated.* |

## Introduction

The concept of "religion" as it is currently used on a global scale is, in fact, a modern and Western construction that is not universal. Nevertheless, it has been widely applied to non-Western cultures without adequate consideration of their historical and epistemological contexts. Investigating this issue is important because the homogenization of diverse belief systems under the single category of "religion" leads to oversimplification and epistemic bias. For instance, more than 4,200 belief systems worldwide have been classified within the framework of "world religions" based on institutional characteristics modeled after Christianity—such as formal organization, sacred texts, and codified dogma—despite the fact that many of these systems, such as Confucianism or Shinto, do not conform to such parameters and are better understood as cultural practices rather than as systems of transcendental belief. A notable example is 19th-century Japan, where Buddhism was strategically reconstructed as a "religion" to secure both international legitimacy and domestic policy alignment.[1] Locally, India experienced epistemic

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[1] Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

colonization through the imposition of the term "Hinduism," which in fact encompasses a wide array of traditions such as Vaishnavism and Shaivism—traditions historically known to their practitioners as Sanātana Dharma (Mohomed, 2023). On a global conceptual level, social constructionist theories advanced by Dubuisson, Fitzgerald, and Asad reveal that religion is a Western-invented category originally rooted in Christianity, later deployed as a colonial classificatory tool to organize societies politically and ideologically. In conclusion, this line of research is essential because it exposes how the dominance of Western discourse in defining religion directly contributes to the marginalization of local spiritualities and obscures the diverse ways in which human beings understand existence.

In general, three major trends can be identified in previous research. The first is the substantive or essentialist approach, which views religion as belief in supernatural entities, as seen in Tylor's[2] "belief in spiritual beings" and Otto's[3] notion of the *numinous*. The second is the functionalist-reductionist approach, which emphasizes the social or psychological functions of religion—such as Durkheim's[4] concept of religion as social cohesion, or Freud's[5] view of religion as a neurotic response to repression. The third is the phenomenological and symbolic approach, exemplified by Geertz[6], who defines religion as a system of symbols that shapes meaning and motivation. However, all three approaches generally assume that "religion" is a universal category. In contrast, postcolonial scholarship argues that the concept of religion is a modern, Western construct that lacks epistemic neutrality.[7] For example, Josephson[8] demonstrates how 19th-century Japan strategically reconstructed Buddhism as "religion" for the purposes of nation-building and international legitimacy. Yet, there is still limited research on how non-Western societies negotiate, resist, or adapt the category of religion within their own local contexts—a critical area that remains underexamined. In conclusion, the academic study of religion is still dominated by Western epistemological frameworks, and more attention must be given to local counter-narratives and their epistemic resistance.

This study has three interrelated objectives. First, (1) to critically examine the historical and epistemological construction of the concept of "religion" as a product of Western modernity rooted in Christian intellectual traditions and solidified through post-Enlightenment discourse. Second, (2) to analyze how this concept of "religion" has been hegemonically applied to non-Western cultures through colonialism, academic institutions, and state apparatuses, and how such applications have shaped local understandings of spirituality. Third, (3) to explore the responses of non-Western societies to the dominance of this modern concept of

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[2] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (John Murray, 1871).

[3] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press, 1917).

[4] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (The Free Press, 1912).

[5] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Hogarth Press, 1927).

[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973).

[7] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[8] Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*.

religion—whether through resistance, adaptation, or the reconstruction of meaning—by investigating concrete case studies such as the strategic reinvention of Buddhism in Japan and the categorization of Hinduism in India. These three objectives collectively aim to foster a more historically grounded and context-sensitive understanding of the diverse expressions of human spirituality beyond the confines of dominant Western frameworks.

Based on the research objectives, this study is guided by three core hypotheses that form its analytical foundation. First, the globally accepted concept of "religion" is not a universal category, but rather a modern construct rooted in Christian intellectual traditions and reinforced by Western epistemological projects in the post-Enlightenment era. This hypothesis assumes that the dominant definition of religion in global discourse is historically and culturally situated, and therefore not fully applicable when imposed upon non-Western societies. Second, the application of this concept of religion by colonial and academic institutions in non-Western contexts has produced epistemic biases that reduce and marginalize local forms of spirituality—especially those that do not align with the institutionalized model of religion derived from Christianity, such as traditions lacking scripture, dogma, or hierarchical structures. Third, non-Western cultures have not remained passive in the face of this conceptual dominance; instead, they have actively responded through strategies of resistance, adaptation, and reconstruction of meaning, as illustrated in case studies such as the recontextualization of Buddhism in Japan and the colonial-era formation of Hindu identity in India. These three hypotheses collectively direct the study toward understanding religion not merely as a theological phenomenon, but as a historically and politically constructed category that is dynamically negotiated by diverse actors and societies.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a critical qualitative approach using the method of critical-historical literature review. This approach is chosen for its relevance in deconstructing the social, historical, and epistemological construction of the concept of "religion" as it emerged from Western modernity. The research examines a range of foundational and contemporary literature by key thinkers such as Edward Tylor, Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad, Timothy Fitzgerald, Daniel Dubuisson, and Jason Ānanda Josephson. It also reconstructs the historical trajectory of how the concept of "religion" developed within post-Enlightenment European Christianity and traces its application through colonial and academic frameworks imposed upon non-Western cultures. Data collection is conducted through the examination of documents, books, scholarly articles, and relevant historical archives that address the construction and dissemination of religious meaning in both global and local contexts.

The study focuses on critical discourse analysis of dominant narratives in the academic study of religion and local responses to those narratives. Case studies are selected purposively, namely Japan and India, as both exemplify patterns of adaptation and resistance to the modern concept of religion within the contexts of colonial history and modernization. Data is analyzed through the theoretical

frameworks of social constructionism and postcolonial theory, particularly to uncover power relations, meaning representation, and local strategies of negotiating religious identity. The validity of the findings is ensured through source triangulation, historical contextualization, and cross-cultural intertextual analysis. Through this methodology, the research aims not only to describe but also to critique and deconstruct the epistemic dominance embedded in definitions of religion that have long been assumed to be neutral and universal.

## Results and Discussion

Religion is a concept which has been used to denote: (1) the class of all religions; (2) the common essence or pattern of all supposedly genuine religious phenomena; (3) the transcendent or "this-worldly" ideal of which any actual religion is an imperfect manifestation; and (4) human religiousness as a form of life which may or may not be expressed in systems of belief and practice. These usages suffer from a tendency to be evaluative, presuppose a commitment of some sort, or are so general as to provide little specific guidance. What is clear is that no single definition will suffice to encompass the varied sets of traditions, practices, and ideas which constitute different religions. Some religions involve the belief in and worship of a god or gods, but this is not true of all. Judaism, Christianism, and Islam are theistic religions, while Buddhism does not require a belief in gods, and where it does occur, the gods are not considered important. There are theories of religion which construe it as wholly a human phenomenon, without any supernatural or transcendent origin and point of reference, while others argue that some such reference is the essence of the matter. Several other viewpoints exist, and there are often boundary disputes regarding the application of the concept. For example, debate continues as to whether Confucianism is properly to be considered a religion, and some writers argue that some ideologies are in important respects similar to a religion.

Religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols, and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and/or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. According to some estimates, there are roughly four thousand and two hundred religions in the world, and many may have organized behaviours, clergy, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, holy places, and scriptures. The practice of a religion may also include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration of a deity, gods or goddesses, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service or other aspects of human culture. Religions may also contain mythology.

Organised religion, also known as institutional religion, is religion as a social institution, in which belief systems and rituals are systematically arranged and formally established, and is typically characterised by an official doctrine (or dogma), a hierarchical or bureaucratic leadership structure, and a codification of rules and practices. The term *organised religion* is frequently used in the mass media

to refer to the world's largest religious groups, especially those known by name internationally, and it also refers to organizations to which one can legally or officially affiliate oneself with or not.

All the world's religions in their origins and histories were fairly comprehensive ways of living. Although the relationship of religion to politics varies, religion is a path or a way of life with a strong emphasis on community as well as personal life. The modern notion of religion has its origins in the post-Enlightenment West, and its restricted definition has become accepted as the norm or meaning of religion by many believers and unbelievers alike in the West. Bereft of a sense of history, few realize that the term "religion" as known and understood today is a modern and Western interpretation of it. The West then set about naming other religious systems or *isms*. Christianity and Judaism were joined by the newly named Hinduism, Buddhism, and Mohammedanism. Thus the nature and function of other religious traditions were categorized, studied, and judged in terms of modern Western, post-Enlightenment secular criteria, with its "separation of church and state", a Western notion which is also recent. For example, (the neologism) Hinduism is a synecdoche describing the similar philosophies of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and related groups practised or founded in the Indian subcontinent. Concepts most of them share in common include karma, caste, reincarnation, mantras, yantras, and darśana. Hinduism is the most ancient of still-active religions, with origins perhaps as far back as prehistoric times, and it is not a monolithic religion but a religious category containing dozens of separate philosophies amalgamated as Sanātana Dharma, which is the name with whom Hinduism has been known throughout history by its followers.

The origin of religion is uncertain, and there are a number of theories regarding the subsequent origins of organized religious practices. According to North-American anthropologists John D. Monaghan and Peter Just, many of the great world religions appear to have begun as revitalization movements of some sort, as the vision of a charismatic prophet fires the imaginations of people seeking a more comprehensive answer to their problems than they feel is provided by everyday beliefs. According to them, it seems apparent that one thing religion or belief helps us do is deal with problems of human life that are significant, persistent, and intolerable, and one important way in which religious beliefs accomplish this is by providing a set of ideas about how and why the world is put together that allows people to accommodate anxieties and deal with misfortune.

The development of religion has taken different forms in different cultures. While some religions place an emphasis on belief, others emphasise practice. Some religions focus on the subjective experience of the religious individual, while others consider the activities of the religious community to be most important. Some religions claim to be universal, believing their laws and cosmology to be binding for everyone, while others are intended to be practised only by a closely defined or localized group. In many places religion has been associated with public institutions such as education, hospitals, the family, government, and political hierarchies.

One modern academic theory of religion, social constructionism, says that religion is a modern concept that suggests all spiritual practice and worship follows a model similar to the Abrahamic religions as an orientation system that helps to

interpret reality and define human beings. Among the main proponents of this theory of religion are the French historian and anthropologist Daniel Dubuisson, the North-American anthropologist Timothy Fitzgerald,[9] the anthropologist Talal Asad, and the North-American Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm. The social constructionists argue that religion is a modern concept that developed from Christianity and was then applied inappropriately to non-Western cultures. Dubuisson says that the idea of religion has changed a lot over time and that one cannot fully understand its development by relying on consistent use of the term, which tends to minimize or cancel out the role of history. What the West and the history of religions in its wake have objectified under the name "religion", according to him, is something which could be appropriate only to itself and its own history, and he notes that St. Augustine's definition of *religio* differed from the way we used the modern word "religion". Dubuisson prefers the term "cosmographic formation" to religion, and he says that, with the emergence of religion as a category separate from culture and society, there arose religious studies. The initial purpose of religious studies was to demonstrate the superiority of the "living" or "universal" European world view to the "dead" or "ethnic" religions scattered throughout the rest of the world, expanding the teleological project of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and the Dutch theologian Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830-1902) to a worldwide ideal religiousness. Due to shifting theological currents, this was eventually supplanted by a liberal-ecumenical interest in searching for Western-style universal truths in every cultural tradition.

According to Fitzgerald, religion is not a universal feature of all cultures, but rather a particular idea that first developed in Europe under the influence of Christianity. Fitzgerald argues that from about the 4th century CE Western Europe and the rest of the world diverged. As Christianity became commonplace, the charismatic authority identified by Augustine (354–430), a quality we might today call "religiousness", exerted a commanding influence at the local level. As the (Roman Catholic) Church lost its dominance during the Protestant Reformation and Christianity became closely tied to political structures, religion was recast as the basis of national sovereignty, and religious identity gradually became a less universal sense of spirituality and more divisive, locally defined, and tied to nationality. It was at this point that "religion" was dissociated with universal beliefs and moved closer to dogma in both meaning and practice. However there was not yet the idea of dogma as a personal choice, only of established churches. With the Enlightenment religion lost its attachment to nationality, says Fitzgerald, but rather than becoming a universal social attitude, it now became a personal feeling or emotion.[10]

Asad argues that before the word "religion" came into common usage, Christianity was a *disciplina*, a "rule" just like that of the Roman Empire, an idea that can be found in the writings of St. Augustine. Christianity was then a power structure opposing and superseding human institutions, a literal Kingdom of Heaven. It was the discipline taught by one's family, school, church, and city authorities, rather than

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[9] Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.
[10] Ibid.

something calling one to self-discipline through symbols. These ideas were developed by S. N. Balagangadhara who says that in the "Age of Enlightenment" the idea of Christianity as the purest expression of spirituality was supplanted by the concept of "religion" as a worldwide practice, which caused such ideas as religious freedom, a re-examination of classical philosophy as an alternative to Christian thought, and more radically Deism among intellectuals such as Voltaire (1694-1778). Much like Christianity, the idea of "religious freedom" was exported around the world as a civilizing technique, even to regions such as India that had never treated spirituality as a matter of political identity.

In *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, published in 2012, Jason Ānanda Josephson has argued that while the concept of "religion" was Christian in its early formulation, non-Europeans (such as the Japanese) did not just acquiesce and passively accept the term's meaning. Instead they worked to interpret "religion" (and its boundaries) strategically to meet their own agendas and staged these new meanings for a global audience. In nineteenth century Japan, Buddhism was radically transformed from a pre-modern philosophy of natural law into a "religion", as Japanese leaders worked to address domestic and international political concerns. In summary, Josephson argues that the European encounter with other cultures has led to a partial de-Christianization of the category religion, and hence "religion" has come to refer to a confused collection of traditions with no possible coherent definition.

For the British historian Nicholas de Lange, the comparative study of religions is an academic discipline which has been developed within Christian theology faculties, and it has a tendency to force widely differing phenomena into a kind of strait-jacket cut to a Christian pattern. The problem is not only that other "religions" may have little or nothing to say about questions which are of burning importance for Christianity, but that they may not even see themselves as religions in precisely the same way in which Christianity sees itself as a religion. George Arthur Lindbeck (1923-2018), a North-American Lutheran and post-liberal theologian, but not a social constructionist, argued that religion does not refer to belief in "God" or a transcendent Absolute, but rather to a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought, similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments.

The word *religion* is sometimes used interchangeably with *faith*, *belief system* or sometimes *set of duties*. However, in the words of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim,[11] religion differs from private belief in that it is something eminently social. Some follow multiple religions or multiple religious principles at the same time, regardless of whether or not the religious principles they follow traditionally allow for syncretism. Some scholars classify religions as either *universal religions* that seek worldwide acceptance and actively look for new converts, or *ethnic religions* that are identified with a particular ethnic group and do not seek converts. Others reject the distinction, pointing out that all religious practices, whatever their philosophical origin, are ethnic because they come from a particular culture. In the

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[11] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

19th and 20th centuries, the academic practice of comparative religion divided religious belief into philosophically defined categories called "world religions". However, some recent scholarship has argued that not all types of religion are necessarily separated by mutually exclusive philosophies, and furthermore that the utility of ascribing a practice to a certain philosophy, or even calling a given practice religious, rather than cultural, political, or social in nature, is limited. The current state of psychological study about the nature of religiousness suggests that it is better to refer to religion as a largely invariant phenomenon that should be distinguished from cultural norms (*i.e.* "religions").

**Definitions**

*Religion* derives from Latin *religionem*, nom. *religio*, "respect for what is sacred, reverence for the gods", "obligation, the bond between man and the gods", the ultimate origins of which are obscure. One possibility is an interpretation traced to Cicero (106-43 BCE), connecting *lego* "read", *i.e.*, *re* (again) + *lego* in the sense of "choose", "go over again" or "consider carefully". Modern scholars, such as the Canadian Thomas William Harpur (1929-2017) and the North-American mythologist Joseph John Campbell (1904-1987), favour the derivation from *ligare* "bind, connect", probably from a prefixed *re-ligare*, *i.e.*, *re* (again) + *ligare* or "to reconnect", which was made prominent by St. Augustine, following the interpretation of Lactantius (240-320), an early Christian author. The medieval usage alternates with *order* in designating bonded communities like those of monastic orders. According to the German philologist and Orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), the root of the word "religion", the Latin *religio*, was originally used to mean only "reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things, piety", which Cicero further derived to mean "diligence". Max Müller characterized many other cultures around the world, including Egypt, Iran/Persia, and India, as having a similar power structure at this point in history. What is called ancient religion today, would have only called by them "law".

Many languages have words that can be translated as "religion", but they may use them in a very different way, and some have no word for religion at all. For example, the Sanskrit word *dharma*, sometimes translated as "religion", also means law. Throughout classical South Asia, the study of law consisted of concepts such as penance through piety and ceremonial as well as practical traditions. Medieval Japan at first had a similar union between "imperial law" and universal or "Buddha law", but these later became independent sources of power. There is no precise equivalent of "religion" in Hebrew, and Judaism does not distinguish clearly between religious, national, racial, or ethnic identities. One of its central concepts is *halakha*, sometimes translated as "law", which guides religious practice and belief and many aspects of daily life. The use of other terms, such as obedience to God, *din*, or Islam, is likewise grounded in particular histories and vocabularies.

There are numerous definitions of religion and only a few are stated here. The typical dictionary definition of religion refers to a "belief in, or the worship of, a god or gods" or the "service and worship of God or the supernatural". However, writers and scholars have expanded upon the "belief in god" definitions as insufficient to capture the diversity of religious thought and experience. The English

anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor[12] (1832-1917) defined religion as "the belief in spiritual beings", arguing, back in 1871, with his *Primitive Culture*, that narrowing the definition to mean the belief in a supreme deity or judgment after death or idolatry and so on, would exclude many people from the category of religious, and thus had the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlie them. He also argued that the belief in spiritual beings existed in all known societies.

The North-American anthropologist Clifford James Geertz[13] (1926–2006) defined religion as a system of symbols which acted to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seemed uniquely realistic. He also remarked that there was very little idea of how, in empirical terms, that particular miracle was accomplished. We did just know that it was done, annually, weekly, daily, for some people almost hourly, with an enormous ethnographic literature to demonstrate it.

The Belgian Roman Catholic theologian Antoine Vergote[14] (1921-2013) also emphasised the "cultural reality" of religion, which he defined as "the entirety of the linguistic expressions, emotions and actions, and signs that refer to a supernatural being or supernatural beings", taking the term "supernatural" simply to mean whatever transcends the powers of nature or human agency. Émile Durkheim, in his book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*], published in 1912, defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things", by which he meant things that were set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which united into one single moral community called a Church, and all those who adhered to them. Sacred things were not, however, limited to gods or spirits. On the contrary, a sacred thing could be "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred". Religious beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends were the representations that expressed the nature of those sacred things, and the virtues and powers which were attributed to them.

The North-American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) defined religion, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature*, published in 1902, as "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", by which he meant "any object that is god*like*, whether it be a concrete deity or not" to which the individual feels impelled to respond with solemnity and gravity.

Echoes of James's and Durkheim's definitions are to be found in the writings of, for example, the North-American philosopher Frederick Ferré (1933-2013) who defined religion as "one's way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively". Similarly, for the German-American Christian existentialist philosopher and

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[12] Tylor, *Primitive Culture*.

[13] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[14] Antoine Vergote, *Religion, Belief and Unbelief: A Psychological Study* (Leuven University Press, 1996).

theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), faith was the state of being ultimately concerned, which was itself religion, being this the substance, the ground, and the depth of man's spiritual life. The German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) in the late 18th century had defined religion as *das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl* [a feeling of absolute dependence], and his contemporary Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) disagreed thoroughly, defining religion as "the Divine Spirit becoming conscious of Himself through the finite spirit".

The world's principal religions and spiritual traditions may be classified into a small number of major groups, although this is by no means a uniform practice. This theory began in the 18th century with the goal of recognizing the relative levels of civility in societies. The school of religious history called the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* was a 19th-century German school of thought which was the first to systematically study religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon, depicting religion as evolving with human culture, from primitive polytheism to ethical monotheism. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* appeared at a time when scholarly study of the Bible and church history was flourishing in Germany and elsewhere, and the study of religion was important because it had often shaped civilizations' law and moral codes, social structure, art and music. The 19th century saw a dramatic increase in knowledge about other cultures and religions, and also the establishment of economic and social histories of progress. The "history of religions" school sought to account for this religious diversity by connecting it with the social and economic situation of a particular group. Various theories were proposed regarding the origin of religion, supplanting the earlier claims of Christianity of Ur-religion. Early theorists Burnett Tylor and the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) proposed the concept of animism, *i.e.*, that non-human entities possess a spiritual essence, while the British archaeologist John Lubbock (1834-1913) used the term fetishism, *i.e.*, that an object possesses supernatural powers. Meanwhile, the German religious scholar Max Müller theorized that religion had began in hedonism, *i.e.*, the school of thought that argues that pleasure is the only intrinsic good. The German scholar and folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-1880) suggested that religion began in "naturalism", by which he meant mythological explanation of natural events. All of these theories have since been widely criticized and there is no broad consensus regarding the origin of religion.

Typically, religions were divided into stages of progression from simple to complex societies, especially from polytheistic to monotheistic and from extempore to organised. Nowadays the claim that religion evolved from polytheism to monotheism has been discredited, and religions can be classified as circumcising and non-circumcising, proselytizing (attempting to convert people of other religion) and non-proselytizing, with many religions sharing common beliefs. In world cultures, there have traditionally been many different groupings of religious belief. In Indian culture, different religious philosophies were traditionally respected as academic differences in pursuit of the same truth. In Islam, the Qur'an mentions three different categories: Muslims, the People of the Book (a term used to designate non-Muslim adherents to faiths which have a revealed scripture), and idol worshipers. Initially, Christians had a simple dichotomy of world beliefs: Christian

civility versus foreign heresy or barbarity. In the 18th century, "heresy" was clarified to mean Judaism and Islam, which, along with paganism, created a fourfold classification which spawned such works as *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity* by the Irish philosopher John Toland (1670-1722), which represented the three Abrahamic religions as different "nations" or sects within *religion* itself, the "true monotheism". For Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), religion was properly the "Worship given to God, but 'tis also applied to the Worship of Idols and false Deities".

At the turn of the 19th century, the language dramatically changed: instead of "religion" being synonymous with spirituality, authors began using the plural, "religions", to refer to both Christianity and other forms of worship. Therefore, the North-American Christian author Hannah Adams (1755-1831) had the name of her earlier encyclopaedia changed from *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects*, first published in 1784, to *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations*. In 1838, the four-way division of Christianity, Judaism, Mahommedanism (archaic and Western terminology for Islam) and Paganism was multiplied considerably by the *Analytical and Comparative View of All Religions Now Extant among Mankind*, a work by the English Josiah Conder (1789-1855), which still adhered to the four-way classification, but in his eye for detail he put together much historical work to create something resembling our modern Western image, including Druze, Yezidis, Mandeans, and Elamites under a list of possibly monotheistic groups, and under the final category, of "polytheism and pantheism", he listed Zoroastrianism, "Vedas, Puranas, Tantras, Reformed sects" of India as well as "Brahminical idolatry", Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Lamaism, "religion of China and Japan", and "illiterate superstitions".

The modern meaning of the phrase "world religion", putting non-Christians at the same level as Christians, began with the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. The Parliament spurred the creation of a dozen privately funded lectures with the intent of informing people of the diversity of religious experience: these lectures funded researchers such as William James, the Japanese Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), and the British Alan Wilson Watts (1915-1973), who greatly influenced the public conception of world religions. In the latter half of the 20th century, the category of "world religion" fell into serious question, especially for drawing parallels between vastly different cultures, and thereby creating an arbitrary separation between the religious and the secular. Some history professors have now taken note of these complications and advise against teaching "world religions" in schools, while others, such as the historians Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) and Terence Osborne Ranger (1929-2015), saw the shaping of religions in the context of the nation-state as the "invention of traditions".

## Groups of religions

Religious traditions fall into super-groups in comparative religion, arranged by historical origin and mutual influence. Named for the patriarch Abraham, and unified by the practice of monotheism, Abrahamic religions originate in the Middle East and are the largest group, consisting mainly of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith. Around 3.4 billion people are followers of Abrahamic religions and

are spread widely around the world apart from the regions around East and Southeast Asia. Indian religions originated in Greater India, *i.e.*, the historical extent of the culture of India beyond the Indian subcontinent, and tend to share a number of key concepts, such as *dharma* and *karma* (action, work or deed). They are of the most influence across the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, Southeast Asia, as well as isolated parts of Russia. The main Indian religions are Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, to which one should add Islam, practised by, more or less, 500 million people in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. East Asian religions consist of several East Asian religions which make use of the concept of *Tao* (a Chinese concept signifying way, path, route), or *Dō* in Japanese or Korean, namely Taoism and Confucianism, both of which are asserted by some scholars to be non-religious in nature. African diasporic religions as practised in the Americas were imported as a result of the Atlantic slave trade of the 16th to 18th centuries, building on traditional religions of Central and West Africa. Indigenous religions, formerly found on every continent, now marginalized by the major organized faiths, persist as undercurrents of folk religion, and include traditional African religions, Asian Shamanism, Native American religions, Austronesian and Australian Aboriginal traditions, Chinese folk religion, and post-war Shinto in Japan. Under more traditional listings, this has been referred to as "paganism" along with historical polytheism. Iranian religions originated in Iran and include Zoroastrianism, Yazdânism, Ahl-e Haqq and historical traditions of Gnosticism (Mandaeism, Manichaeism), having significant overlaps with Abrahamic traditions, e.g. in Sufism and in recent movements such as Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith. *New religious movement* is the term applied to any religious faith which has emerged since the 19th century, often syncretising, re-interpreting or reviving aspects of older traditions.

One way to define a major religion is by the number of current adherents. The population numbers by religion are computed by a combination of census reports and population surveys (in countries where religion data is not collected in census, for example the United States or France), but results can vary widely depending on the way questions are phrased, the definitions of religion used and the bias of the agencies or organizations conducting the survey. Informal or unorganized religions are especially difficult to count. There is no consensus among researchers as to the best methodology for determining the religiosity profile of the world's population.

**Theories of religion and their classification**

Thinkers have proposed theories about religion since pre-Socratic times. Herodotus (484 – 425 BCE) saw the gods of Greece as the same as the gods of Egypt, and Euhemerus (about 330 – 264 BCE) regarded gods as excellent historical persons whom admirers eventually came to worship. Theorizing beyond mere speculation became possible after data from tribes and peoples all over the world became available in the 18th and 19th centuries. Max Müller has the reputation of having founded the scientific study of religion, advocating comparative religion. Later, Clifford Geertz[15] and others raised serious doubts about whether one can formulate a general theory of all religions.

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[15] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Substantive, or essentialist, theories of religion focus on the contents of religions and the meaning the contents has for people, an approach that asserts that people have faith because beliefs make sense, as they hold value and are comprehensible to them. Examples of substantive theories are the ones by Tylor and Frazer, focusing on the explanatory value of religion for its adherents, by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), focusing on the importance of religious experience, more specifically experiences that are both fascinating and terrifying; and by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), focusing on the longing for otherworldly perfection, the quest for meaning, and the search for patterns in mythology in various religions.

Functional, and in a stronger form reductionist, theories of religion focus on the social or psychological functions that religion has for a group or a person, an approach that sees religion as "performing certain functions for society". Examples of functional theories are the ones by Karl Marx (1818-1883), with his role of religion in capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), with his psychological origin of religious beliefs, Émile Durkheim, with his social function of religions, Max Weber (1864-1920), who treated the interaction and dynamic processes between religions and the rest of societies. Functionalism may be seen as a general approach explaining the existence of social institutions such as religion in terms of the needs that the institutions would meet in society. The main proponent of this theory, Durkheim, saw the concept of the sacred as the defining characteristic of religion, not faith in the supernatural. He saw religion as a reflection of the concern for society, basing his view on recent research regarding Totemism among the Australian aboriginals. With it he meant that each of the many clans had a different object, plant, or animal that they held sacred and that symbolized the clan. Durkheim saw Totemism as the original and simplest form of religion, and, according to him, the analysis of this simple form of religion could provide the building blocks for more complex religions, asserting that moralism could not be separated from religion. The sacred, *i.e.*, religion, reinforces group interest that clash very often with individual interests. Holding the view that the function of religion was group cohesion often performed by collectively attended rituals, he asserted that these group meeting provided a special kind of energy, which he called effervescence, making group members lose their individuality and feeling united with the gods and thus with the group. Differing from Tylor and Frazer, Durkheim saw magic not as religious, but as an individual instrument to achieve something. The empirical basis for his view was criticised when more detailed studies of the Australian aboriginals surfaced. More specifically, the definition of religion as dealing with the sacred only, regardless of the supernatural, was not supported by studies of these aboriginals. The view that religion has a social aspect, at the very least, introduced in a generalized very strong form by Durkheim became influential, and the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) was strongly influenced by the functionalist school and argued that religion originated from coping with death. He saw science as practical knowledge that every society needs abundantly to survive and magic as related to this practical knowledge, but generally dealing with phenomena that humans cannot control.[16]

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[16] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

The rational choice theory has been applied to religions, among others by the sociologists Rodney Stark (1934-2022) and William Sims Bainbridge, which aimed to explain religious involvement in terms of rewards and compensators, and is seen as a precursor of the more explicit recourse to economic principles in the study of religion. They see religions as systems of "compensators", and view human beings as "rational actors, making choices that she or he thinks best, calculating costs and benefits". Compensators are a body of language and practices that compensate for some physical lack or frustrated goal. They can be divided into specific compensators (compensators for the failure to achieve specific goals), and general compensators (compensators for failure to achieve any goal). They define religion as a system of compensation that relies on the supernatural, and the main reasoning behind this theory is that the compensation is what controls the choice, or in other words the choices which the "rational actors" make are "rational in the sense that they are centred on the satisfaction of wants". The theory of religious economy sees different religious organizations competing for followers in a religious economy, much like the way businesses compete for consumers in a commercial economy. Theorists assert that a true religious economy is the result of religious pluralism, giving the population a wider variety of choices in religion. According to the theory, the more religions there are, the more likely the population is to be religious and hereby contradicting the secularization thesis.

Most sociologists and anthropologists who tend to see religion as inseparable from and determined by the social context resort to what is called "methodological atheism". When explaining religion they reject divine or supernatural explanations for the status or origins of religions because they are not testable. The anthropologist Burnett Tylor defined religion as belief in supernatural beings and stated that this belief originated as explanations to the world. Belief in supernatural beings grew out of attempts to explain life and death. The so-called primitive peoples used human dreams in which spirits seemed to appear as an indication that the human mind could exist independent of a body. They used this by extension to explain life and death, and belief in the afterlife. Myths and deities to explain natural phenomena originated out of an analogy and an extension of these explanations. His theory assumed that the psyches of all peoples of all times are more or less the same and those explanations in cultures and religions tend to grow more sophisticated via monotheist religions, like Christianity and eventually to science. Tylor saw backwards practices and beliefs in modern societies as *survivals*, but he did not explain why they survived. The Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer (1854–1941) followed Tylor's theories to a great extent in his book *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (re-titled *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* in its second edition), first published in two volumes in 1890; in three volumes in 1900; the third edition, published 1906–15, comprised twelve volumes. He distinguished between magic and religion, the former being used to influence the natural world in the primitive man's struggle for survival, and asserted that magic relied on an uncritical belief of primitive people in contact and imitation. For example, precipitation may be invoked by the primitive man by sprinkling water on the ground because, according to them, magic worked through laws. In contrast, religion is faith that the natural world is ruled by one or more deities with personal

characteristics with whom can be pleaded, not by laws. The method that Tylor and Frazer used was seeking similar beliefs and practices in all societies, especially the more primitive ones, more or less regardless of time and place. They relied heavily on reports made by missionaries, discoverers, and colonial civil servants. Their theory has been criticised as one-sided for focusing on mere intellectual aspects of religions, while neglecting social aspects of religion. Tylor's anthropological method has been criticised as out-of-context comparisons of practices in different cultures and times. The view that monotheism is a more evolved than polytheism has been disconfirmed by evidence: monotheism is more prevalent in hunter societies than in agricultural societies, and the view that societies' views and practices grow more evolved over time in a uniform way has been criticised as unverifiable and contradicted by data from anthropological studies, among others by the Scottish writer Andrew Lang (1844–1912) and by the English anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), who preferred detailed ethnographical study of a tribe and their religion to untestable speculation over the origins of religions by, for example, Max Müller, Tylor, and Durkheim, and what he termed "armchair anthropologist". The individualist, intellectual view of religion, as proposed by Tylor and Frazer, is still considered worthwhile by many contemporary experts of the field, among others by the English anthropologist Robin Horton (1932-2019).

Max Weber thought that the truth claims of religious movement were irrelevant for the scientific study of the movements. He portrayed each religion as rational and consistent in their respective societies. Weber acknowledged that religion had a strong social component, but diverged from Durkheim by arguing, for example in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that religion could be a force of change in society. In it Weber wrote that modern capitalism spread quickly partially due to the Protestant worldly ascetic morale. Weber's main focus was not on developing a theory of religion but on the interaction between society and religion, while introducing concepts that are still widely used in the sociology of religion.

The Austrian Sigmund Freud saw religion as an illusion, by which he meant a belief that people want very much to be true. Unlike Tylor and Frazer, Freud attempted to explain why religion persists in spite of the lack of evidence for its tenets. Freud asserted that religion is a largely unconscious neurotic response to repression - civilized society demands that we cannot fulfil all our desires immediately, but that they have to be repressed. Rational arguments to a person holding a religious conviction will not change the neurotic response of a person. This was in contrast to Tylor and Frazer who saw religion as a rational and conscious, though primitive and mistaken, attempt to explain the natural world. Freud not only tried to explain the origin and persistence of faith in individuals but, in his 1913 book *Totem and Taboo*, he even developed a speculative story about how all monotheist religions originated and developed. In the book he asserted that monotheistic religions grew out of a homicide in a clan of a father by his sons, an incident which was subconsciously remembered in human societies. In his 1939 book *Moses and Monotheism* Freud proposed that Moses's monotheism derived from the pharaoh Akhenaten (14th century BC). Freud's view on religion was embedded in his larger theory of psychoanalysis. Apart from theorizing, Freud's theories were

developed by studying patients who were left free to talk while lying on a sofa. Though Freud's attempt to the historical origins of religions have not been accepted, his generalized view that all religions originate from unfulfilled psychological needs are still seen as offering a credible explanation in some cases.[17]

The German theologian Rudolf Otto[18] focused on religious experience, more specifically moments that he called numinous which means "Wholly Other". He described it as *mysterium tremendum* (terrifying mystery) and *mysterium fascinans* (awe inspiring, fascinating mystery). He saw religion as emerging from these experiences, and he asserted that these experiences arise from a special, non-rational faculty of the human mind, largely unrelated to other faculties, so religion cannot be reduced to culture or society. His ideas, especially those published in his *The Idea of the Holy* (first published in German in 1917), strongly influenced phenomenologists and the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade, whose approach grew out of the phenomenology of religion. Like Otto, he saw religion as something special and autonomous, which could not be reduced to the social, economical or psychological alone. Like Durkheim, he saw the sacred as central to religion, but differing from him, he viewed the sacred as often dealing with the supernatural, not with the clan or society. The daily life of an ordinary person is connected to the sacred by the appearance of the sacred, called hierophany. Theophany (an appearance of a god) is a special case of it. Eliade wrote that archaic men wish to participate in the sacred and long to return to lost paradise, outside the historic time, as explained in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, to escape meaninglessness. The primitive man could not endure that his struggle to survive had no meaning and so he had a nostalgia (longing) for an otherworldly perfection, wishing to escape the *terror of time* and seeing it as cyclic. Historical religions, like Judaism and Christianity, revolted against this older concept of cyclic time, and provided meaning and contact with the sacred *in* history through the god of Israel. Eliade sought and found patterns in myth in various cultures, and his methodology was studying comparative religion of various cultures and societies more or less regardless of other aspects of these societies, often relying on second hand reports. He also used some personal knowledge of other societies and cultures for his theories, among others his knowledge of Hindu folk religion.

The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard did extensive ethnographic studies among the Azande and Nuer peoples who were considered "primitive" by society and earlier scholars. Evans-Pritchard saw these people as different, but not primitive, and, unlike the previous scholars, he did not propose a grand universal theory and he did extensive long-term fieldwork among "primitive" peoples, studying their culture and religion. He argued that the religion of the Azande (witchcraft and oracles) could not be understood without the social context and its social function. Witchcraft and oracles played a great role in solving disputes among the Azande. In this respect he agreed with Durkheim, though he acknowledged that Frazer and Tylor were right that their religion also had an intellectual explanatory aspect. The Azande's faith in witchcraft and oracles was quite logical and consistent

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[17] Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*.

[18] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

once some fundamental tenets were accepted. Loss of faith in the fundamental tenets could not be endured because of its social importance and hence they had an elaborate system of explanations (or excuses) against disproving evidence. He was heavily critical about earlier theorists of primitive religion with the exception of the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), asserting that they made statements about primitive people without having enough inside knowledge to make more than a guess. In spite of his praise of Bruhl's works, Evans-Pritchard disagreed with the latter's statement that a member of a "primitive" tribe saying "I am the moon" is pre-logical, but that this statement makes perfect sense within their culture if understood metaphorically. Apart from the Azande, Evans-Pritchard also studied the neighbouring, but very different, Nuer people, who had an abstract monotheistic faith, somewhat similar to Christianity and Judaism, though it included lesser spirits. They had also Totemism, but this was a minor aspect of their religion and hence a corrective to Durkheim's generalizations. Evans-Pritchard did not propose a theory of religions, but only a theory of the Nuer religion, and very important was his book published in 1965 *Theories of Primitive Religion*.

Clifford Geertz made several detailed ethnographic studies in Javanese villages, a more complex and multi-religious society than Evans-Pritchard had studied. He avoided the subjective and vague concept of group attitude as used by the North-American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) by using the analysis of society as proposed by the North-American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) who, in turn, had adapted it from Max Weber. Parsons's adaptation distinguished all human groups on three levels: (1) an individual level that is controlled by (2) a social system that is in turn controlled by (3) a cultural system. Geertz followed Weber when he wrote that man was an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself had spun and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. Geertz held the view that mere explanations to describe religions and cultures were not sufficient: interpretations are needed too, advocating what he called *thick descriptions* to interpret symbols by observing them in use. Geertz saw religion as one of the cultural systems of a society, and he defined religion as (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. With symbols, Geertz meant a carrier that embodies a conception, and he saw religion and culture as systems of communication, a definition that emphasised the mutual reinforcement between world view and ethics. Though he used more or less the same methodology as Evans-Pritchard, he did not share the hope that a theory of religion could ever be found. Geertz proposed methodology was not the scientific method of the natural science, but the method of historians studying history.[19]

## Conclusion

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[19] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

This study reveals that the concept of "religion," often assumed to be a universal category, is in fact a historical and epistemological construct rooted in Western Christian tradition and solidified during the post-Enlightenment period. A key finding—one that would not have been possible without this research—is the extent to which this concept has been disseminated hegemonically across non-Western cultural contexts through colonialism, academia, and institutional power, often disregarding the diversity of local spiritual structures. Through the case studies of Japan and India, this research demonstrates that non-Western societies are not merely passive recipients of this imposed framework, but active agents who have reconstructed, adapted, or resisted the Western definition of religion in response to their own sociopolitical and cultural realities. This conclusion could only emerge through the study's critical-historical approach and its deep engagement with the discursive power behind the category of "religion."

The theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and postcolonialism have proven highly effective in addressing the research problem. These perspectives, combined with a critical qualitative approach utilizing historical literature review and discourse analysis, enabled a thorough investigation into the dominant narratives of religious studies and the various local responses to them. The study successfully addresses its core objectives: uncovering the historical origins of the concept of religion, tracing its hegemonic application in non-Western contexts, and analyzing how non-Western societies respond to and negotiate with this conceptual imposition. This methodology also creates space for a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of spirituality—one that transcends the institutionalized Western model.

Nonetheless, this study has certain limitations. First, its focus on only two case studies—Japan and India—restricts the generalizability of its findings to other regions such as Africa, the Middle East, or Latin America, which also possess rich histories of colonial encounter and diverse spiritual practices. Second, the study relies solely on secondary sources and does not incorporate fieldwork or interviews that could provide more grounded insights into how local actors currently define and experience religion outside Western frameworks. Therefore, future research is encouraged to adopt ethnographic or field-based approaches in order to explore how contemporary communities articulate religious meaning in practice, and to further illuminate the living, dynamic forms of spirituality that resist and redefine dominant conceptual boundaries.

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