Defining Religion

§1. The Project: Where angels fear to tread

The history of religious studies is littered with failed definitions of 'religion'. Past attempts have proven to be too narrow, too broad, too vague, or otherwise problematic. Accordingly, most religious studies scholars make do either with somewhat *ad hoc* and narrow definitions, for the technical purposes of specific empirical inquiries, or with family-resemblance definitions.

Indeed, in the last serious attempt to offer a definition of religion in the history of analytic philosophy, William Alston (1967) opted for a family-resemblance account. The best he thought we could do was to list "religion-making characteristics." None of these characteristics were deemed necessary nor sufficient for making something a religion; nor were the listed characteristics supposed to be jointly sufficient. This was, he thought, the best we could do. By contrast, I shall offer a definition of religion which, I suggest, provides us with the necessary and sufficient conditions for a set of ideas and/or practices to constitute a religion. Moreover, I suggest that the definition is extensionally and intensionally adequate, and that it captures what ordinary speakers mean when they talk about religion.

Despite the proven ability of religious studies scholars to operate without an agreed upon definition of 'religion', it would still be desirable to find one. Empirical studies about religion can hope to be much less qualified and hedged, if only a precise, substantive, and accurate definition could be found for 'religion'. It is just such a definition that I shall propose in this paper. In the wake of such a definition, philosophical discussions about the distinctive virtues and vices of religion can aim to be much more confident and general. Moreover, philosophy of religion – in recent years – has focussed much more on theological problems, and discussion of evidence and warrant for theological beliefs, than it has focused on the nature, role, and value of religion itself. Perhaps having a definition of religion would help to remedy that state of affairs.

Moreover, beyond the confines of the philosophy of religion narrowly conceived, a number of thorny issues in political philosophy might be rendered less thorny if we had a clear definition of what religion actually is. For example, scholars debate the extent to which it is acceptable, in a pluralistic society, for citizens and politicians to appeal to religious reasons in public discourse.[1] That is to say: is it appropriate to justify public policy in a pluralistic society on the basis of religious reasons? Similar debates take place regarding religious *exemptions*.[2] Can it be moral or appropriate for people to demand exemptions from legal requirements that bind other citizens, purely on religious grounds? Those who argue for and against such exemptions, and those who argue for and against the acceptability of religious reasons in public discourse, would surely stand to benefit from a clearer conception of what religion actually is.

I am aware that the project of this paper manifests a sort of audacity that constructive philosophy is known for, and that religious studies might sneer at. Surely only fools rush in where angels fear to tread. And yet, perhaps there's a surprisingly simple reason why so many past attempts have failed. Indeed, I shall argue that in order to arrive at our hoped-for definition, we simply need to reverse the order of explanation commonly posited between religion and religiosity. Once we recognise that religiosity is explanatorily prior to religion, rather than the other way around, it becomes surprisingly easy to formulate a definition of 'religion' that seems to be immune to any obvious counter-example.

In the end, criticisms of the definition I propose will be moot until critics find a clear counter-example, either in the form of a religion that isn't covered by the definition, or in the form of something that clearly isn't a religion that *is* covered by the definition. Ultimately, I leave that ball in the court of would-be critics, and hope that the definition I propose will prove itself fit for purpose.

§2. Religiosity First

Counter-examples seem to lie in wait for every candidate definition of 'religion'; showing that the definition is either too narrow, or too broad. The existence of atheistic religions, for example, will rule out a definition of religion in terms of theology (such James Martineau's suggestion that (1888, p. 15), "Religion is the belief in an ever living God…").[3]

Some have tried to define religion in terms of morality and duty (Kant, 1999, p. 153). But these attempts are not sufficiently discerning. We should be careful not to confuse systems of ethics with religions. Others have tried to define religion in terms of the experience of the holy (Otto, 2010). But does *every* religion, and do *only* religions, have such a concept? Secular atheists report moments of awe and transcendence, and they use the language of sanctity to describe them (Wettstein, 2012, p. 33, documents such uses).

Emile Durkheim defined religion as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things … which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, 2008, p. 47). Durkheim therefore added the notions of *community* and *practice* to Kant's morality, and to Otto's sanctity. One wonders whether these additions are enough. One could imagine a club for art enthusiasts. They have an organised *community*. They have a regular *practice*, which is to visit museums and galleries together. They share certain values. They take art to be, in some sense, *sacred*. And they seek experiences of awe in the "chapel" of the art museum. Is this club a religion, or yet another counter-example to yet another failed definition?

Notice that all of these definitions seek to define religion independently of religiosity. Presumably, all of these definitions would relate to religion as explanatorily prior to religiosity. First they would tell us what religion is, and then they could define religiosity in terms of some sort of allegiance to religion.

John Dewey (2013, p. 25) and Paul Tillich (1963, p. 4) focus upon *religiosity* instead of religion. They define 'religiosity' in terms of its affective qualities, and how it plays a central role in organizing one's activities and concerns. But this approach doesn't give us an obvious route back to a definition

3

of religion. A commune of Marxists might say that their political ideology has affective qualities, and that it plays a central role in organizing their activities and concerns. We *do* recognise that people can dedicate themselves with a religious *zeal* to things that are not *religions*. Religiosity and religion can come apart.[4]

But if you can be a religious Marxist as easily as you can be a religious Hindu, then what is it that makes Marxism an ideology, and Hinduism a religion? Dewey's (2013, p. 1) suggestion is that 'religion' in its classic sense has something to do with belief in the supernatural. But not every belief in the supernatural is religious, and it's not clear that every religion would accept that they *do* believe in the supernatural, nor is it obvious how, exactly, to draw the distinction *between* the natural and the supernatural (see Lebens, 2020, pp. 226-228).

And yet, I shall argue that what's distinctive about religions is that they *call for* religious devotion. Marxism and football fandom can give rise to *religiosity*, but, I shall argue, they don't *call for* it. Religion does.

If that's right, then once we have a clear conception of what religiosity is, then the following definition of 'religion' should suffice, without admitting of counter-examples:

Religion: A religion is a system of thought and/or practice that calls for religiosity from its adherents

Now all we need is a definition of religiosity that's precise enough to power this definition of 'religion', and to close the door on possible counter-examples. That is the task of this paper.

First, a disclaimer: although I deny that 'religion' is a family-resemblance term, since I'm in the business of providing a *definition*, I do however recognise that *religiosity* can come in degrees. It's not always a black and white issue as to whether a person is religious or not. Accordingly, the criteria I lay out for living a religious lifestyle are only intended to define a '*norm-kind*' for religiosity. Religious life-styles are only religious to the extent and degree that they *approximate* the norm-kind.[5] A religion, I

shall argue, is a system of thought and practice that calls upon its adherents to do their best to approximate that norm-kind.

§3. Religiosity

In this section, I present a three-part definition of 'religiosity'.[6]

§3.1. Community

There is a cognitive component to religiosity, and we shall get to it, in time. But it's important to note that religiosity has a communal or social aspect. Indeed, religiosity often has more to do with *community* than it has to do with *belief*. Even when a religion formulates a binding catechism, the socio-historical act of forming that catechism often has more to do with *belonging* than it has to do with *content*.

For some religions, what I've said about belonging and belief in the previous paragraph, is uncontroversial. Judaism is a good example. Witness the classical Rabbinic text that comes closest to approximating a catechism; the Mishna in tractate *Sanhedrin* 10:1:

> These [Jews] have no share in the World to Come: One who says that the resurrection
>
> of the dead is not from the Torah, or that the Torah is not from Heaven, and an
>
> *Apikoros…*

The text isn't explicitly concerned with what people *think* but only with what they *say* and *do*. Denial of the doctrine of resurrection, and denial of the divinity of the Oral Torah, were the rallying cries of the Sadducees – a sectarian rival to Rabbinic Judaism. The *Apikoros* is understood, by the Talmudic gloss on this Mishna, to be a person who disrespects the Rabbis. In other words: it might not matter what you *think*, so long as you don't *say* that the Oral Torah isn't from heaven. If you go about *saying* that, you'll be adding to sectarian strife – you'll be lending support to the Sadducees, or you'll be undermining the Rabbis. Indeed, the notion that these people have no share in the World to Come is

a shorthand for saying that they're not really Jews, since the Mishna begins with the assertion that 'All of Israel have a share in the world to come'. Sectarians do not belong. They must be excluded from the community.

On these grounds, Menachem Kellner (2006) concludes that this Mishna is more concerned with sectarianism than catechism.

But Judaism isn't alone in this regard. Christian conciliar statements spend a great deal of time *anathematising* certain views – a practice that isn't merely about labelling a view as *false*; it's also about shutting certain sorts of believers out of the community; saying to them that they don't belong (unless they change their views). You might accuse me of trying to fit a Christian peg into a Jewish shaped hole, but Aquinas himself argues that holding a false belief can never be sufficient grounds for accusing a person of heresy. Rather, heresy occurs when a person publicly defies the authority of the Church (*Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q11, art. 2).[7]

So far so Catholic. Protestantism, by contrast, was built upon defiance in the face of the authority of 'the Church'. Some Evangelicals claim to abhor established religion. Is community belonging truly a part of their religiosity? I would argue that it is.

Many Protestants do feel a close connection and loyalty to their particular denomination. Moreover, those devout Christians who see themselves as falling outside of any organised religion will nevertheless see themselves as part of a community of fellow travellers; fellow followers or disciples of Jesus, etc. Even the founder of a new religion, who has no community to belong to, hopes to be the first link in a community that will extend on in time.[8] Similarly, the last surviving member of a religious community still views herself as loyal to her communal forbears, even if she has no contemporaries in her community.

Religiosity, it seems, has a lot to do with belonging to a community. Accordingly, the first criterion for living a religious life is:

1. A religious life is a life lived as a part of a community that defines itself around a system of ideas and/or practices.

In fact, this first criterion follows directly from my contention that religion is, at root, a sociological phenomenon. To subscribe to a set of theological doctrines, but not to see yourself as a part of any community at all – not to see your fate as somehow bound up with the fate of your co-religionists – simply falls short of living what most of us would call a distinctively *religious* life. And, indeed, a person with no sense of communal belonging can have a theology and a set of rituals, but not a religion in any *sociological*, and therefore in any standard, sense of the word. A wise and spiritual person living on top of a mountain only becomes a *Guru* in the context of a community.

§3.2. Fundamentals of Faith

Our first criterion entails that beliefs cannot be sufficient for fully-fledged religiosity. Now the question is, to what extent are beliefs a *necessary* component of a religious life? It's clear and uncontroversial that religiosity and *faith* have an intimate relation. We sometimes describe religious people simply as people of faith. But then the question becomes: what is the relationship between faith and belief?

A debate currently rages among philosophers about the nature of propositional faith (i.e., faith that some proposition is true). Some argue that it doesn't require belief (McKaughan, 2013; Howard-Snyder, 2013). And some have argued that it does (Scott & Malcolm, 2017). I have argued that the whole debate misfires (Lebens, MS).

To believe that *p* is to have a certain degree of confidence that *p* is true, but that degree of confidence is context-sensitive. Sometimes belief requires more confidence; sometimes less. Given the context-sensitivity of 'belief', the question as to whether faith requires belief seems to be ill-formed. It's like asking whether somebody is tall, without providing a comparison class. What counts as tall in one context doesn't count as tall in another. Similarly, the degree of confidence that counts as belief in one context doesn't count as belief in another. Accordingly, we'd be wise not to define other attitudes in terms of belief and disbelief where possible.

One thing seems clear: there are contexts in which it *can* be appropriate to say that a person has faith that *p*, without it being appropriate, in the same context, to say that that person *believes*

that *p*. That is to say, there are some contexts in which belief that *p* demands more confidence than does faith that *p*. But all in all, when defining 'faith', we're better off leaving belief talk behind.

With this qualification in place, I think that Daniel Howard-Snyder (2013) has a compelling analysis of propositional faith. According to him, faith that *p* has four ingredients:

(i)   A positive evaluation of *p*

(ii)   A positive conative orientation towards *p*

(iii)   A positive cognitive attitude towards *p*

(iv)   Resilience to counter-evidence for *p*

There's something somehow inappropriate in saying that you have faith that *p*, when you realise that *p* isn't the sort of thing that you should want to be true. This leads to Howard Snyder's first ingredient. To afford *p* a positive evaluation is to think that *p* is the sort of thing that people should want to be true.[9]

In his second ingredient of faith, Howard-Snyder gesticulates towards the difference between wanting something intrinsically and wanting something instrumentally. The mother in the midst of an agonising cancer treatment may no longer care, in and of herself, whether she lives or dies, but she must at least have some *relevant* desire, perhaps the desire to be there for her children as they grow up, if we're to make sense of the claim that she has *faith* that she'll survive (Howard-Snyder, 2013). And thus, what Howard-Snyder means, when he requires 'a positive conative orientation towards *p*', is that faith that *p* demands that we either want *p* to be true intrinsically, or, as in the case of the suffering mother, we want its truth indirectly, or *instrumentally*. To have faith that *p* doesn't merely require the thought that people should want *p* to be true. It also requires the person of faith to want it to be true *themselves*.[10]

When Howard-Snyder talks about a 'positive cognitive attitude' towards a proposition, he simply means that you have to have some confidence that *p* is true. How *much* confidence? I don't think that's a fair question, since, as with belief, the confidence threshold for faith will be context-sensitive. However, we *can* say that faith, in certain contexts, can survive less confidence than belief

can normally survive. Sometimes you can have faith that *p* even if you only think that *p* is the least unlikely of the relevant options. Apparently, when T. S. Eliot was questioned about his Christianity, he replied that it was the least false-seeming of the options that was open to him (Howard-Snyder, 2013, p. 365). That degree of confidence was sufficient to give rise to faith.

Finally, Howard-Snyder insists that faith has to be resilient in the face of counter-evidence. I would argue that this is because, in many contexts, it will be true to attribute 'faith that *p*' to a person even when, in the very same context, it will be inappropriate to attribute 'belief that *p*' to the same person. And this is because, in a given context, faith will often demand a lower degree of confidence than belief. This alone will make faith more resilient, in general, to counter-evidence than is belief.[11]

To commit to a religion will require faith in some set of propositions. Some religions have book length catechisms. Some have just a handful of fundamental principles. Sometimes a religion has no principles at all, and defines itself, instead, around a set of practices. Even so, to commit oneself to such practices will require faith in some set of propositions or other, even if two practitioners of the same religion can justify their identical practices via faith in *different* sets of propositions. So, whether a religion is orthodox or orthoprax, religiosity will *still* require propositional faith.

A Catholic might think that their religiosity has been misrepresented. According to Catholicism, faith is an infused virtue, given by God. Faith might dispose you towards believing the content of revelation, but it is *belief*, and *disbelief*, rather than faith, that are going to be the difference between a heretic and a non-heretic. So how can I not write 'belief' into my analysis of religiosity? And yet, I will stick to my guns.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta (2007), in her darker, most anguished moments, prayed to God, confessed that she lacked belief, and asked for his help to be saved from doubts. Will the Catholic maintain that she was a *heretic*? All the while she *wanted* God to exist. She thought it *plausible* that he did. She certainly had what I'm calling 'faith'. Perhaps she had belief too, under some contextually determined interpretation of the word 'belief', but her confidence sometimes slipped below the levels that we'd *generally* pick out as relevant for belief. What matters is that she had what Howard-Snyder

would recognise as propositional faith. In a religious context, you can call that belief, if you like. Or you can call it faith. But it's what she had!

We can now state our second essential ingredient of a religious life:

2. To live a religious life requires propositional faith directed towards the fundamental principles of the system of thought referred to in criterion 1 (or, at least to their conjunction[12]), and/or towards some set of propositions such that faith in them can warrant commitment to the practices referred to in criterion 1.

Marxism *does* call for its adherents to unite into something like a community. After all, the *Communist Manifesto* ends with its rallying call: 'Workers of the world, unite!'. Moreover, Marxism seems to call upon its adherents to want certain things, and to hope for them, to believe that certain things are possible, to have *faith* in certain principles. If we define religiosity in terms of our first two criteria, and if we define a religion as a system of thought that calls for religiosity, then Marxism will be defined – erroneously – as a religion, even as the Marxist would insist that religion is the opiate of the people. But in fact, religiosity includes more than just community membership and faith. It requires that one engage one's imagination. This is the third criterion.

§3.3. Imaginative Engagement

Religions *tend* to demand that their followers imaginatively engage with a particular set of narratives; a *narrative canon*. To engage with a narrative is, first and foremost, to engage one's *imagination*. Whether we're dealing with a fictional narrative, or a non-fictional narrative, if it's written *as* a narrative, then we engage our mind's eye. We imagine the scenes described unfolding, as if we're watching them. Neurological research suggests that we use the same regions of our brain in witnessing an event of type *X*, as we do when we process a mere narrative about an event of type *X* (Oatley, 2008; Marr, 2011; Young & Saver, 2001). To read or listen to a narrative is to engage in a sort of offline mental simulation of witnessing the events described.

I can't argue that religiosity *per se* requires narrative engagement, since not all religions have a narrative canon. Admittedly, some forms of Buddhism revolve around stories about the Buddhas, but Zen Buddhists, despite their own body of legends and stories, seem to think that such stories are something of a *distraction* from the endeavour of enlightenment.[13] Quakerism, despite its roots in Christianity, today eschews any particular canon of narratives. What I *can* say, is that every religion demands *some* form of imaginative exercise. In order to develop my claim, we need to distinguish between a number of forms of imaginative engagement.

As you imagine the events of a narrative unfolding, you're not necessarily projecting yourself *into* them. Imagining events in this somewhat detached fashion, as unfolding without you, is what Peter Alward (2006) calls *de dicto* imaginative engagement. Sometimes a narrative calls for *de re* imaginative engagement when, for example, you're invited to imagine, concerning an actual location in London, namely Baker Street, that Sherlock Holmes once lived there. Sometimes, *de se* imaginative engagement is what's called for. When we play games of role-play or make-believe, for example, we thrust *ourselves* into the imaginative action. We imagine that *we* are soldiers, or superheroes, or butterflies, or what have you.

Zen Buddhism, despite eschewing narrative, certainly seems to place a great weight upon acts of *de se* imagination. Certain elements of its meditative practice, known as zazen, could be characterised as a very minimalistic, and intentionally sparse, form of *de se* imaginative engagement: *you are your breath*.[14]

When thinking about *de re* and *de se* imaginative engagement, we can make some further distinctions. Sometimes we are invited to imagine ourselves, or something around us, in what can only be called, a literally true light. According to Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, for example, we are not simply commanded to believe that God exists, we have to *view ourselves* as living in a world in which God exists, and to see ourselves as his creations (see his commentary to the first of the Ten Commandments, in Exodus (Hirsch, 2009)). According to Judaism, we *do* live in a world in which God

exists. We are God's creatures. But that doesn't mean that we automatically *view ourselves as* living in such a world, *as* his creatures.

When you're being asked to imagine yourself, or something around you, in a *true* light, I would call it *'attentive-seeing-as'*. This can be *de se*, as when the Jew tries to see herself as a creature of God, or *de re*, as when the Quakers 'endeavor to see "that of God" in every person' (Clarke, et al., 2011). I call it *attentive-seeing-as* because you don't believe that you're making something up – instead you're trying to attend to something that's all too easily ignored. It's as if you're engaging your imagination in order to see the world more *accurately*, in *accordance* with what you believe, or in accordance with your faith. I call engagement in an act of *attentive-seeing-as*, adopting a perspective.

Besides regular make-believe (which can be *de dicto*, *de se* or *de re*), and *attentive-seeing-as* (which can only be *de se* or *de re*), there's another type of *seeing*-as that is relevant to the religious life. I call it *metaphorical-seeing-as*. Elisabeth Camp (2009) helps us to distinguish between regular *de se* make-believe, and *metaphorical-seeing-as*. In order to make believe that she is Anna Karenina, she has to forget all about Elizabeth Camp, or at least to ignore everything that's distinctive about herself. She ignores that she is a philosopher, and a professional woman in the twenty-first century, and tries, instead, to *pretend*, even to herself, that she's a Russian aristocrat in the nineteenth century. She tries, in some sense, to lose herself. We're talking here about a process akin to method acting. Compare this process with the metaphor that *Elisabeth Camp is Anna Karenina*. Processing this metaphor, she has to view *herself* through the prism of Anna Karenina. She says (Camp, 2009, pp. 112-3):

> I might decide that Anna's conflict between her love for her son and her love for Vronsky mirrors my own struggle to reconcile parental devotion and professional ambition… The overall result of this [metaphorical] matching process is a restructured understanding of myself, one which highlights, connects, and colors my Anna-like features while downplaying the rest

Throughout this process, Camp cannot lose sight of herself, and her own life story, which she matches up with details of Anna Karenina's story. *Attentive-seeing-as* harnesses the power of your imagination

to help you see its object for what you already believe it to be. *Metaphorical-seeing-as* 'helps you to reconstruct your understanding' of its object.

Similar to the distinction between attentive-seeing-as and metaphorical-seeing-as is Terence Cuneo's distinction between playing a role and playing a *target* role. To play a role is consistent with losing yourself in an act of *de se* imagination. To play a *target* role, on the other hand, is to play a part 'for the purpose of *being that way*, becoming like or identifying with that which one imitates' (Cuneo, 2016, p. 78). To play Anna Karenina as a target role would be to act like her in order to become more like her or to identify with her. Cuneo argues that the adoption of target roles is common-place in Christian (and especially Eastern Orthodox) liturgy.

Howard Wettstein (2002; 2012) talks about *signing on* to an image. Take the image of God judging us on Rosh Hashona. What it means to *sign on* to that image, I take it, is to agree to structure your life through its prism, to engage your emotions with it, to make it your *own*, to choreograph your life with this image as part of your personal symbolic landscape. What religious people *do*, characteristically, is to engage in a very powerful and intimate way, with certain images at certain times; to *sign on to them*. This is where religiosity goes further than propositional forms of faith and manifests what is sometimes called 'global faith' (Audi, 2011, pp. 53, 57-58), and faith as a venture; models of faith that require a person to organise and orient their lives in a certain way (Kvanvig, 2013; 2015).

And thus we can now formulate our third and final essential ingredient of a religious life:

3. To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement (either via a species of make-belief, attentive or metaphorical seeing-as, target role playing, or in terms of *signing on*, depending on the context) with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief and/or perspectives of the system of ideas and practices in question.[15]

Religious life, at least as a norm-kind, is supposed to be absorbing. It is the imaginative component of religion that gives rise, most centrally, to this quality. It is one thing to *believe* in a religion; it is another thing to *sign on*. Signing on is what it means, *to live one's life in service of an ideal* (to echo Kvanvig,

2013; 2015). Signing on engages the imagination. There is something defective about a religiosity that believes in a creed but fails to engage the imagination; that would be a faith without a full-blooded religious psychology.

Some people might point to Yeshayahu Leibowitz as a counterexample to this third criterion, and perhaps to the second as well. He was a religious Jew. And yet his theology was remarkably austere. He thought that it wasn't our place to investigate the reasons for the commandments, and that we should simply obey them (Leibowitz, 1992, pp. 14, 16). Moreover, his negative theology led him to think that substantive theology quickly descends into idolatry (Leibowitz, 1979, p. 129). Does this leave room in his religiosity for any cognitive content?

And yet, Leibowitz must at least have had faith in some set of principles sufficient to justify, if only to himself, continued Jewish *practice*. And so, his religiosity must have satisfied our second criterion. And, despite the austerity of his religious vision, he was a man who engaged deeply with the narratives of the Bible, about which he wrote compelling homilies (Leibowitz, 2002). Indeed, he wrote (Leibowitz, 1992, p. 140):

> From the standpoint of religious faith, the Torah and the entirety of Holy Scripture must
>
> be conceived as a demand which transcends the range of human cognition—the demand
>
> to know God and serve Him—a demand conveyed in various forms of human expression:
>
> prescriptions, vision, poetry, prayer, thought, and narrative.

Poetry and narrative are among the vehicles for the message of the Torah. Accordingly, I *wouldn't* accept that Leibowitz is a counterexample to my definition of religiosity. And if he were, then I would be willing to entertain the thought that, despite his intensity, his profundity, and his moral vision, perhaps he wasn't a *paradigm* case of religiosity. Perhaps there is, indeed, something sufficiently austere about his religiosity to render it something of an outlier, at least in relation to the norm-kind. But that's precisely why my definition of religiosity only seeks to delineate a norm-king; a paradigm towards which real-world tokens of religiosity approximate in varying degrees. But this needn't affect the precision of the forthcoming definition of 'religion.'

14

§4. Religion Defined

In the previous section, I argued that the norm-kind for religiosity can be defined in terms of the following three criteria for living a religious life:

1. A religious life is a life lived as a part of a community that defines itself around a system of ideas and/or practices.

2. To live a religious life requires propositional faith directed towards the fundamental principles of the system of thought referred to in criterion 1 (or, at least to their conjunction), and/or towards some set of propositions such that faith in them can warrant commitment to the practices referred to in criterion 1.

3. To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement (either via a species of make-belief, attentive or metaphorical seeing-as, target role playing, or in terms of signing on, depending on the context) with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief and/or perspectives of that system of ideas and/or practices.

The notion of a person living a life that satisfies these three criteria provides us with a norm-kind for religiosity. A person is religious to the extent that she approximates this norm-kind. And of course, this allows, as we *should* allow, that a person can commit oneself to something that isn't a religion, such as Marxism, or even football fandom, in a distinctively religious way.

Where past definitions of 'religion' have gone wrong, I claim, is that they haven't recognised that religiosity is explanatorily prior to religion. With an understanding of religiosity already in place, however, we can define 'religion' as follows:

Definition: For any system of ideas and/or practices *R*, *R* is a religion iff:

i. *R* calls upon its adherents to live their lives as part of a community that defines itself around *R*, and

ii. *R* calls upon its adherents to have propositional faith in the conjunction of some set (or other) of propositions, and

iii. *R* invites its adherents to engage their imagination with a set of canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief and/or perspectives.

A person can exhibit all of the elements of religiosity even in their football fandom. But to be a fan of a given team doesn't require, or call for, all three elements in the way that a religion does. What does it mean for religion to *call for* religiosity? Since a religion is a set of ideas and/or practices, it can contain prescriptions. A religion *prescribes* religiosity of its adherents (and sometimes, in the case of proselytising religions, it prescribes adherence of all people). That's all it means for a religion to call for religiosity.

A person can be a Marxist with truly religious zeal. Not only might they see themselves as members of the global proletariat, not only might they have faith in the fundamental principles of Marxist ideology, but they might even see the world, imaginatively, through the prism of Marxist symbols and metaphors. But Marxism *isn't* a religion. Our definition can explain why.

Marxism *doesn't* call upon its adherents to engage their imagination in this distinctively religious way. You're no less good a Marxist for not being interested in Marxist art, narratives, metaphors, or poetry. It is because Marxism *doesn't* call upon Marxists to instantiate this third element of religiosity that Marxism isn't a religion. Indeed, a Marxist might rightly point out that it is this imaginative element of religion that can make religion such a dangerous opiate to begin with.

The cult of personality that has developed around the Kim dynasty in North Korea might be classified, by my definition, as a religion. It really does seem to call for every element of my definition of religiosity from the citizens of North Korea. But this definitional scheme seems to get things right. The official political ideology of North Korea *has*, to all intents and purposes, become a state religion. It's certainly a cult-like and pernicious religion. But it's a religion nonetheless. If accepting that fact is

a consequence of my definition of 'religion', then it seems to be a strength of my definition rather than a weakness.

But what about a desert island cast-away – a Robinson Crusoe; can't he found a religion, even once he's lost hope of founding a community? Or what about the last surviving human after a nuclear holocaust, can she not found a religion, even without hope of founding a community? Doesn't the reliance of my definition upon community erroneously rule out such possibilities? No. I think that a Crusoe figure *can* found a religion, but only if he harbours the *desire* to found a community around the system of ideas and/or practices in question; only if that system *calls* for community. The fact that he knows that this desire and this calling is unlikely, or even impossible to satisfy, doesn't, on my definition, undermine the fact that he founded a religion.

But, what if Robinson Crusoe founded a system of beliefs and/or practices according to which other people are supposed to find their *own* paths? What if his system of beliefs and/or practices renounces any call for community building around it? Dean Zimmerman put it to me (in correspondence) that, if the tenets of Crusoe's faith were rich, and if there was, for example, lots of prayer, and ritual, we'd still want to call it a *religion*, despite its renunciation of community; even if we could only call it a *private religion*. My definition, and its reliance upon the call to community, seems erroneously to rule out Crusoe's community renouncing religion.

The community-renouncing lifestyle that our Crusoe adopts certainly contains elements of religiosity. A person is religious to the extent to which his lifestyle approximates the norm-kind laid out in §3. This Crusoe's lifestyle approximates two elements of that norm-kind to a very high degree, high enough – perhaps – for us to call him a religious person. Nevertheless, I would maintain that any plausible definition of 'religion' would have to deny that this community-renouncing Crusoe has founded a religion. I can demonstrate the point via a *reductio*.

Assume that our community-renouncing Crusoe is not just religious, but that he *has* founded a religion. On the basis of this assumption, we're going to find it hard to avoid the conclusion that there are, in the world, at least as many religions as there are idiosyncratic spiritual people. But, surely

we don't want a definition of 'religion' to have that consequence. Accordingly, I would suggest that a "private religion" is no more of a religion than "false teeth" are teeth. Private religions are not religions.

Critics will be eager to find more putative counter-examples. Most of my argument was drawn from Judaism and various Christian confessions, although I did make reference to the Zen practice of zazen. Will my definition of religion extend naturally to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more? I'll leave it to critics to find counter-examples. I don't know of any.

Indeed, I claim that our definition includes atheistic, orthodox, orthoprax, western, eastern, new, and old religions, and that it doesn't include anything that isn't a religion. Accordingly, we have a definition of 'religion' that seems fit for purpose. A religion is a system of ideas and/or practices that calls for religiosity from its adherents.

Notes

[1] See, for example: Greenawalt, 1988; Audi, 1990; Raz, 1990; Perry, 1991; Kymlicka, 1992; Quinn, 1995; and Habermas, 1995.

[2] See, for example: Leiter, 2013; and Vallier, 2016.

[3] Having recognised that there can be atheistic religion, Alston (1967) goes on to offer what he seems to regard as an exhaustive taxonomy of religion in terms of where they locate divinity (in various sorts of objects, in certain words or literature, or in mystical experience). This is surprising since Alston surely recognises that not every religion has a conception of divinity at all.

[4] Indeed, this was a central contention of Dewey's definition of religiosity (Dewey, 2013).

[5] Thanks to Terence Cuneo for this suggestion.

[6] I shall be using 'religiosity' and 'religious' almost interchangeably. Religiosity is a property instantiated by lifestyles (among other things). A person is religious to the extent that her lifestyle exhibits religiosity. It is in terms of these personal properties that I hope to define what a religion is.

[7] Thanks to Simon Hewitt for pointing this out to me.

[8] I will introduce (and rebut) a further possible counter-example to this claim later on, with a Robinson Crusoe type castaway.

[9] In Lebens 2020, p. 276-277, I discuss an objection to this ingredient of faith. I refer readers to the discussion there.

[10] In Lebens 2020, p. 277, I discuss a potential counter-example to this ingredient of faith. I refer readers to the discussion there.

18

[11] In correspondence, Simon Hewitt raises two putative counter-examples to Howard-Snyder's account of faith: (a) Hewitt's own belief that Fermat's last theorem is true; (b) the devil's belief that God exists. In neither case would we want to say that there's *faith*, but Howard-Snyder's definition, according to Hewitt's objection, can exclude neither of them.

The devil wants it to be true that God exists since, if God *didn't* exist, neither would the devil! Accordingly, the devil has a positive conative attitude towards the proposition, via an instrumental desire, and thus can be said, counter-intuitively (and contra the New Testament, James 2:19) to have faith.

To respond: I think it's possible for people to have pro-attitudes (i.e., favourable attitudes) towards necessarily false propositions. And thus, even though it's necessarily false that the devil could exist without God, the devil may still *wish*, per impossible, that he *could* exist without God, and therefore, he might have an overall positive desire for God's non-existence. Accordingly: he believes that God exists, but he doesn't have *faith*.

Regarding the first counter-example, Hewitt thinks that true mathematical propositions are the sort of propositions that people should believe. He therefore has a positive evaluation of Fermat's last theorem. His belief in the theorem is also very resilient to counter-evidence, since the theorem has been firmly established by the mathematical community. But a positive evaluation of the theorem, in combination with resilience to counter-evidence, isn't sufficient to generate faith. You also have to have a positive conative attitude towards the proposition in question. If it turns out that Andrew Wiles's proof of the theorem is faulty, and if it turns out that the theorem itself is actually *false*, then what will Hewitt have lost – apart from a mistaken belief? It therefore makes sense to say that *Wiles* has faith that the theorem is true, but not that Hewitt has faith in its truth, unless he'd also be terribly disappointed by its disproof.

In further correspondence, Hewitt said that, although the disproof of Fermat's last theorem wouldn't be much of a blow to him personally, he could think of other mathematical propositions in which he was more invested. For example, he would be disappointed if it turned out that there was actually a highest prime number, because the loss of the infinite structure of the sequence of prime numbers would be a loss of an elegance that Hewitt treasures. If that's the case, then I'm very willing to say that Hewitt doesn't just *believe* that the sequence is infinite, he *hopes* that it is; he has *faith* that it is. I don't consider this a damaging counter-example to Howard-Snyder's account. I think it's simply an example of faith in a mathematical proposition.

[12] I add the parenthesis because you might desire that P&Q be true without desiring that one of the conjuncts be true without the other. Accordingly, faith in a conjunction won't always distribute over the conjuncts.

[13] Hence the phrase, attributed to the Zen Master, Linji Yixuan, 'If you meet the Bhudda on the road, kill him.' On the road to your own *personal* enlightenment, engaging with stories about the Bhudda will only be a distraction. We each have our own path to take.

[14] Hewitt, in correspondence, objects. Zazen cannot be *de se* imaginative engagement because there is nothing that it is *like*, for a human animal, *to be breath*.

There are a number of different concerns that could be lurking under the surface here. You might think that there can be no such thing as a nonsensical proposition. And thus, you might think that the sentence 'I am my breath', as uttered by a human being, simply fails to express anything. Wittgenstein, for example, thought it impossible to have nonsensical, or illogical, thoughts. This was part of his critique of Russell's theory of assertion

19

(Wittgenstein, 1961, 5.422). On this view, there can be no propositional attitudes towards the proposition that a human being is a breath, for there can be no such proposition. 'Read sympathetically,' Hewitt suggests, 'we should see this kind of locution as a poetic way of saying 'focus on your breath to the exclusion of all else.''

I don't feel the pressure of this objection because I think that certain sorts of 'nonsensical' sentences *do* express propositions, and thus, it *is* possible to have propositional attitudes towards certain sorts of 'nonsense' – especially towards category mistakes, like the one at the heart of zazen. For arguments to bolster this claim, see Ofra Magidor (2013).

In fact, Hewitt accepts that category mistakes can still express propositions. So perhaps his worry is *this*: even though my uttering, 'I am my breath', may express a proposition, that proposition isn't one that I can *imagine to be true*, since I can't *visualise* its truth, since there is nothing it would be like for it to *be* true!

In response to this objection, I might point towards the work of Tamar Gendler (2000), who explores *obviously* and *explicitly* impossible stories that still serve as perfectly good stories, for which narrative uptake occurs. Surely we engage our imagination with such stories in some way or other.

Alternatively, and perhaps relatedly, I could simply concede: yes, it's true that nobody can successfully imagine being their own breath. This doesn't mean that they can't *try!* A child might *try* to jump to the moon. It isn't *possible* for her to jump that high, but it won't stop her from *trying*. More generally, it is possible for an agent to *try* to *Φ*, even when *Φ*-ing is impossible for them. Perhaps the Zen master merely *tries* to imagine that he is his breath – and this attempt, though it's doomed to fail, might be thought to bring certain positive effects in its wake.

[15] For extensive and fascinating discussion of the use of imagination in the religious life of Evangelical Americans, see Tanya Luhrmann (2012).

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Alston, W. P., 1967. Religion. In: P. Edwards, ed. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* New York: Macmillan.

Alward, P., 2006. Leave me out of it: De re but not de se imaginative engagement with fiction. *The Journal of Aestehics and Art Criticism,* 64(4), pp. 451-459.

Audi, R., 1990. Religions and the Ethics of Political Participation. *Ethics,* Volume 100, pp. 386-397.

——— 2011. *Rationality and Religious Commitment.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Camp, E., 2009. Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments. *Midwest Studies in Phliosophy,* Volume 33, pp. 107-130.

Clarke, E. et al., 2011. *An Introduction to Quaker Testimonies.* Philadelphia, PA.: American Friends Service Committee.

Cuneo, T., 2016. *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dewey, J., 2013. *A Common Faith (The Terry Lectures).* 2nd ed. New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press.

Durkheim, E., 2008. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* Dover Publications Inc..

Gendler, T. S., 2000. The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance. *Journal of Philosophy,* Volume 97, pp. 55-81.

Greenawalt, K., 1988. *Religious Convictions and Political Choice.* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Habermas, J., 1995. Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls' Political Liberalism. *The Journal of Philosophy,* Volume XCII, p. 109–131.

Hirsch, S., 2009. *The Hirsch Chumash.* New York: Philipp Feldheim.

Howard-Snyder, D., 2013. Propositional Faith: What it is and what it is not. *Americal Philosophical Quarterly,* 50(4), pp. 357-372.

Kant, I., 1999. *Kant: Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kellner, M., 2006. *Must a Jew Believe Anything?.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization.

Kvanvig, J., 2013. Affective Theism and People of Faith. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* Volume 37, pp. 109-128.

——— 2015. The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in NonCognitivist Approaches to Faith. In: M. Bergmann & J. Brower, eds. *Essays on Faith and Reason.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kymlicka, W., 1992. Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance. *Analyse und Kritik,* Volume 14, p. 33–55.

Lebens, S., 2019. *The Principles of Judaism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— MS. Will I get a job? Contextualism, Belief, and Faith.

Leibowitz, Y., 1979. *Talks on the Ethics of the Fathers and on Maimonides [Hebrew].* Jerusalem: Schocken.

——— 1992. *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State.* Cambridge, Ma. and London: Harvard University Press.

——— 2002. *Accepting the Yoke of Heaven: Commentary on the Weekly Torah Portion.* New York: Urim Publications.

21

Leiter, B., 2013. *Why Tolerate Religion?.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Luhrmann, T. M., 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God.* New York: Vintage.

Magidor, O., 2013. *Category Mistakes.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marr, R., 2011. The neural bases of social cognition and story comprehension. *Annual Review of Psychology,* Volume 62, pp. 103-134.

Martineau, J., 1888. *A Study of Religion: Its Sources and Contents.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

McKaughan, D. J., 2013. Authentic Faith and Acknowledged Risk: Dissolving the Problem of Faith and Reason. *Religious Studies,* 49(1), pp. 101-124..

Oatley, K., 2008. The mind's flight simulator. *The Psychologist,* Volume 21, pp. 1030-1032.

Otto, R., 2010. *The Idea of the Holy.* Martino Fine Books.

Perry, M. J., 1991. *Love and Power: The Role of Religion and Morality in American Politics.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Quinn, P. L., 1995. Political Liberalisms and their Exclusions of the Religious. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association,* Issue November, p. 35–56.

Raz, J., 1990. Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence. *Philosophy & Public Affairs,* 19(1), p. 3–46.

Scott, M. & Malcolm, F., 2017. Faith, Belief and Fictionalism. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly,* 98(S1), p. 257–274.

Teresa of Calcutta, 2007. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta.* New York: Doubleday.

Tillich, P., 1963. *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Vallier, K., 2016. The Moral Basis of Religious Exemptions. *Law and Philosophy,* Volume 1-28, p. 35.

Wettstein, H., 2002. Poetic Imagery and Religious Belief. In: D. Shatz, ed. *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader.* McGraw-Hill, pp. 107-14.

——— 2012. *The Significance of Religious Experience.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L., 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* London: Routledge.

Young, K. & Saver, J. L., 2001. The Neurology of Narrative. *Interdisiplinary Perspectives,* Volume 30, pp. 72-84.