

The Myth of
Religious Violence

*Secular Ideology and the Roots
of Modern Conflict*

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The Invention of Religion

In the first chapter, at the risk of trying the reader's patience, I undertook an analysis of the varied arguments of nine major thinkers on the question of religion and violence. I wanted to present enough evidence that the reader would conclude that the problem with the arguments would not be solved by coming up with novel and better arguments for why religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence, or by choosing a different set of authors who could better make the argument. The scholars whose arguments I examined in chapter 1 are competent, many of them eminent in their fields, and all have important insights to share on the genesis of violence. The problem is not simply with their scholarship, but with the categories under which the debate takes place. The problem, specifically, is with the category "religion."

There is nothing close to agreement among scholars on what defines religion; the inability to define religion has been described as "almost an article of methodological dogma" in the field of religious studies.¹ Until fairly recently, the academic debate over the definition of religion has taken place between substantivist and functionalist approaches. The former tend to be exclusivist, restricting the meaning of religion to beliefs and practices concerning something like gods or "the transcendent." What separates religion from secular phenomena is therefore described in terms of the content or substance of religious belief. Substantivist definitions of religion approximate the common Western idea of religion as what Christians and Muslims

and Hindus and members of a few other “world religions” believe and do. Functionalist approaches, on the other hand, expand the definition of religion to include ideologies and practices—such as Marxism, nationalism, and free-market ideology—that are not commonly considered religious. They do so by looking not at content but at the way that these ideologies and practices function in various contexts to provide an overarching structure of meaning in everyday social life. Both of these tend to be essentialist approaches that regard religion as a thing out there in the world, a basic, transhistorical, and transcultural component of human social life identifiable by its content or function, if we could only reach agreement on what exact criteria separate religion from the secular.²

There is a significant and growing body of scholars, however, who have been exploring the ways that the very category religion has been constructed in different times and different places. According to this approach, the reason that essentialist definitions have failed to meet with agreement is not a lack of scholarly ingenuity but the fact that there is no essence of religion such that “we all know it when we see it,” as Charles Kimball would have it. Religion is a constructed category, not a neutral descriptor of a reality that is simply out there in the world. Jonathan Z. Smith writes, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. . . . Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”³ I am not convinced that religion is confined to the academy; as we will see in this chapter, missionaries, politicians, bureaucrats, judges, and others have found the term useful. Smith’s main point, however, is that religion is not simply found, but invented. The term religion has been used in different times and places by different people according to different interests. More specifically, the category religion as it is most commonly used is tied up with the history of Western modernity and is inseparable from the creation of what Talal Asad has called religion’s “Siamese twin ‘secularism.’”⁴ Scholars have been exploring the ways that the construction of the category of religion has become an important piece in the ideology of the West since the rise of modernity, both within Western cultures and in the colonization of non-Western cultures. Religion is not simply an objective descriptor of certain kinds of practices that show up in every time and place. It is a term that constructs and is constructed by different kinds of political configurations.

In chapter 1, we encountered a group of scholars who are convinced that religion as such has a lamentable tendency to produce violence. In this chapter, we will encounter another group of scholars who do not think there is any religion as such, except as a constructed ideological category whose changing history must be carefully scrutinized. The scholars in the first group carry on as if they do not know that the second group exists. A few of the scholars in the

first group acknowledge the problem of defining religion, but then continue on to “dissolve” the problem (Hick), ignore it (Marty), or treat it as merely semantic (Kimball). In this chapter, I will draw on the work of the second group of scholars to help explain why the arguments of the first group fail.

The point of this exercise is *not* to dissolve the problem of religion and violence by saying that religion is a fuzzy concept, so there is no such thing as religion and therefore no such problem of religion and violence. The problem is not that the implicit definitions of religion used by the first group of scholars are vague and fuzzy around the edges. With the exception of Richard Wentz, they are very clear about what counts as religion and what does not. The question is, are these distinctions arbitrary? What configurations of power authorize and are authorized by these distinctions? As I will show in this chapter, there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion. What counts as religion and what does not in any given context is contestable and depends on who has the power and authority to define religion at any given time and place. As I will show in this chapter, the concept of religion as used by the theorists in chapter 1 is a development of the modern liberal state; the religious-secular distinction accompanies the invention of private-public, religion-politics, and church-state dichotomies. The religious-secular distinction also accompanies the state’s monopoly over internal violence and its colonial expansion. If the religious-secular distinction develops in the context of this new configuration of power, then the distinctions made by the authors in chapter 1 should be interrogated within this history. If I can show that the very definition of religion is part of the history of Western power, then the idea that religion causes violence might not be simply a neutral, empirical observation, but might perhaps have an ideological function in legitimating certain kinds of practices and delegitimizing others.

In this chapter, I will give evidence for two conclusions. The first conclusion is that there is no transhistorical or transcultural concept of religion. Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority. The second conclusion is that the attempt to say that there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West. In this context, religion is constructed as transhistorical, transcultural, essentially interior, and essentially distinct from public, secular rationality. To construe Christianity as a religion, therefore, helps to separate loyalty to God from one’s public loyalty to the nation-state. The idea that religion has a tendency to cause violence—and is therefore to be removed from public power—is one type of this essentialist construction of religion.

This chapter will proceed in five sections. In the first two sections, I show that religion is not a transhistorical concept. The first section is a history of ancient and medieval *religio*; the second section is a history of the invention of the concept of religion in the modern West. In the third section, I show that religion is not a transcultural concept, but was borrowed from or imposed by Westerners in much of the rest of the world during the process of colonization. In the fourth section, I show that, even within the modern West, the religious-secular division remains a widely contested point. I analyze the argument between substantivist and functionalist approaches and critique both views. In the fifth section, I conclude by arguing that what counts as religious or secular depends on what practices are being authorized. The fact that Christianity is construed as a religion, whereas nationalism is not, helps to ensure that the Christian's public and lethal loyalty belongs to the nation-state. The idea that religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence must be investigated as part of the ideological legitimation of the Western nation-state. I pursue that investigation in more detail in chapters 3 and 4.

Religio

Charles Kimball's book begins with the following claim: "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."⁵ Leroy Rouner's edited collection *Religion, Politics, and Peace* begins with a similar, though somewhat more hopeful claim: "Religion has probably been the single most significant cause of warfare in human history and, at the same time, the single most significant force for peace."⁶ Neither author makes any attempt to support these claims with empirical evidence.

Could it be done? What would be necessary to prove the claim that religion has caused more violence than any other institutional force over the course of human history? One would first need a concept of religion that would be at least theoretically separable from other institutional forces over the course of history. Kimball does not identify those rival institutional forces, but one contender might be political institutions: tribes, empires, kingdoms, fiefs, states, and so on. The problem is that there was no category of religion separable from such political institutions until the modern era, and then it was primarily in the West. What meaning could we give to either the claim that Roman religion is to blame for the imperialist violence of ancient Rome, or the claim that it is Roman politics and not Roman religion that is to blame? Either claim would be

nonsensical, because there was no neat division between religion and politics; Roman *religio* was inextricable from duty to the emperor and to the gods of Roman civic life. Similar comments apply to ancient Israel, Confucian China, Charlemagne's empire, Aztec civilization, and any other premodern culture. Is Aztec religion or Aztec politics to blame for their bloody human sacrifices? For the Aztecs, sacrifices to the gods were simply part of the proper ordering of the cosmos and society; the ordering of human society was a microcosm of the larger cosmic order. Any attempt to prove Kimball's "trite" claim about the destructive influence of religion in history would get bogged down in hopeless anachronism. The futility of this approach can be seen if we replace the word religion with the word politics in Kimball's and Rouner's claims. Is it helpful to say that politics has caused more violence in history than any other institutional force? There is a certain initial plausibility to this idea—wars have usually been instigated by kings, princes, and so on—but when we ask "Politics, as opposed to what?" we quickly see how pointless the claim is.

It is not simply that religion and politics were jumbled together until the modern West got them properly sorted out. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith showed in his landmark 1962 book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, religion as a discrete category of human activity separable from culture, politics, and other areas of life is an invention of the modern West. In the course of a detailed historical study of the concept of religion, Smith was compelled to conclude that, outside of the modern West, there is no significant concept equivalent to what we think of as religion.⁷ Similarly, politics as a category of human endeavor independent of religion is a distinctly modern concept. As Quentin Skinner says, the idea of politics as a distinct branch of moral philosophy is impossible in a medieval context dominated by Augustine's *City of God*. According to Skinner, the seeds of the modern idea of politics would not be sown until William of Morbeke's translation of Aristotle's *Politics* appeared in the thirteenth century, and even then the idea of politics as a distinct branch of inquiry and action would have to await the birth of the modern state in the sixteenth century.⁸

It is a mistake to treat religion as a constant in human culture across time and space. None of the thinkers we examined in chapter 1 would deny that religion has taken a kaleidoscopic variety of forms across the centuries of human history. But each of the theories we examined in the first chapter is about religion *as such*. This indicates a distinction between essence and form; religion is religion in any era and any place, though it may take different outward forms. Even Hick, who explicitly denies that religion has an essence, nevertheless continues to treat ancient Theravada Buddhism and contemporary Pentecostalism equally as religions. The assumption is that, in ancient

Sri Lanka or in contemporary Houston, one may identify the religion or religions of the inhabitants by looking for certain kinds of beliefs and practices.

A history of the term religion makes this assumption deeply problematic. Ancient languages have no word that approximates what modern English speakers mean by religion; Wilfred Cantwell Smith cites the scholarly consensus that neither the Greeks nor the Egyptians had any equivalent term for religion, and he adds that a similar negative conclusion is found for the Aztecs and the ancient civilizations of India, China, and Japan.⁹ The word is derived from the ancient Latin word *religio*, but *religio* was only one of a constellation of terms surrounding social obligations in ancient Rome, and when used it signified something quite different from religion in the modern sense. *Religio* referred to a powerful requirement to perform some action. Its most probable derivation is from *re-ligare*, to rebind or relink, that is, to reestablish a bond that has been severed. To say *religio mihi est*—that something is “*religio* for me”—meant that it was something that carried a serious obligation for a person. This included not only cultic observances—which were themselves sometimes referred to as *religiones*, such that there was a different *religio* or set of observances at each shrine—but also civic oaths and family rituals, things that modern Westerners normally consider to be secular.¹⁰ When *religio* did refer to temple sacrifices, it was possible—and common among certain intellectuals—in ancient Rome to practice *religio*, but not believe in the existence of gods. Although Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* puts forth naturalistic social and psychological theories for the origin of belief in gods,¹¹ Cicero himself was a priest, and retained his position on the Board of Augurs of the republic. As S. N. Balagangadhara points out, this was possible because *religio* was largely indifferent to theological doctrine and was primarily about the customs and traditions that provided the glue for the Roman social order.¹²

Religio was a relatively minor concept for the early Christians, in part because it does not correspond to any single concept that the biblical writers considered significant. In St. Jerome’s Vulgate New Testament—the standard Latin translation for over a thousand years of Christendom—*religio* appears only six times, as a translation for several different Greek terms. In the King James Version of the New Testament, *religion* appears only five times, for three different Greek words—and not always the same ones that Jerome rendered as *religio*.¹³ The word *religio* is found scattered through the Latin patristic writings, where it has a number of different meanings, including ritual practice, clerical office, worship (*religio dei*), and piety, or the subjective disposition of the worshipper toward God.¹⁴

The only treatise written entirely on *religio* in the patristic period was Augustine’s late fourth-century work *De Vera Religione*. In it, Augustine

distinguishes between true *religio* and false *religio*, a distinction introduced in the late third century by Lactantius.¹⁵ Augustine's subject is not "Christianity" as a—or the—true religion alongside other religions understood as systematic sets of propositions and rites. For Augustine, *religio* means worship, the action by which we render praise. There is true worship and false worship. False worship is directed toward many gods, or toward mere created things. True worship is directed toward the one God as revealed by Jesus Christ, and so true worship is found preeminently in the church catholic.¹⁶ There are, however, vestiges of truth everywhere and traces of the Creator in the creation. The impulse to worship is found in all human beings as the inchoate longing for their Creator, whom Augustine understood to be the Holy Trinity.¹⁷ False worship arises when we pay homage to creation and neglect the Creator. Augustine concludes his treatise with a long exhortation against false *religiones*: "Let not our religion be the worship of human works. . . . Let not our religion be the worship of beasts. . . . Let not our religion be the worship of lands and waters."¹⁸ For Augustine, then, *religio* is not contrasted with some sort of secular realm of activity. Any human pursuit can have its own (false) type of *religio*, its own type of idolatry: the worship of human works, lands, etc. These, not something like "paganism" or "Judaism," are contrasted to true worship: "Let our religion bind us to the one omnipotent God, because no creature comes between our minds and him whom we know to be the Father and the Truth, i.e., the inward light whereby we know him."¹⁹

When Augustine later addresses the term *religio* in book X of *City of God*, he finds it—along with *cultus* and *pietas*—inadequate to express the worship of God alone. Although, for lack of a better word, he will use *religio* to refer to the worship of the one true God, he finds it ambiguous because its "normal meaning" refers to devotion in human relationships, especially among family and friends:

The word "religion" would seem, to be sure, to signify more particularly the "cult" offered to God, rather than "cult" in general; and that is why our translators have used it to render the Greek word *thrêskeia*. However, in Latin usage (and by that I do not mean in the speech of the illiterate, but even in the language of the highly educated) "religion" is something which is displayed in human relationships, in the family (in the narrower and the wider sense) and between friends; and so the use of the word does not avoid ambiguity when the worship of God is in question. We have no right to affirm with confidence that "religion" is confined to the worship of God, since it seems that this word has been detached from its normal meaning,

in which it refers to an attitude of respect in relations between a man and his neighbor.²⁰

Augustine is aware that, in normal Latin usage, there is no realm of belief and practice called religion that can be separated out from merely mundane obligations like family and the oaths, cults, and obligations that bind Roman society together. Politics, culture, family obligations, devotion to God or gods, civic duties—all are bound together in one complex web of social relations. For Augustine, the right ordering of social relations must include worship of the true God; this is true *religio*. But *religio* as a general category is found in all manner of social relations, both rightly and wrongly ordered. For Augustine and the ancient world, *religio* is not a distinct realm of activity separate from a secular realm.

As we look to the medieval period, the term *religio* becomes even less frequently used in Christian discourse. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith observes, “It is nowadays customary to think of this period as the most ‘religious’ in the history of Christendom. Despite this or because of it, throughout the whole Middle Ages no one, so far as I have been able to ascertain, ever wrote a book specifically on ‘religion.’ And on the whole this concept would seem to have received little attention.”²¹ According to John Bossy, the ancient meaning of *religio* as duty or reverence “disappeared” in the medieval period: “With very few exceptions, the word was only used to describe different sorts of monastic or similar rule, and the way of life pursued under them.”²² This meaning holds when the word passes into English around 1200; the earliest meaning of religion cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “a state of life bound by monastic vows.” In time, the term came to include the condition of members of other nonmonastic orders; hence the distinction between religious clergy and secular clergy. It is still common Roman Catholic usage to speak of entering an order as entering the religious life. In the early thirteenth century, we find references to religion as indicating a particular monastic or religious order or rule, such that by 1400 we find references to religions in the plural. The religions of England were the various orders: Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, etc.²³

Thomas Aquinas wrote two addresses in which declensions of the word *religio* appear in the title, and both are defenses of religious orders.²⁴ However, Aquinas also used *religio* in the older sense of something approximating both “rites” and “piety.” Bossy cannot be taken literally when he says that such use “disappeared” in the medieval period. Nevertheless, the ancient use was rare in the Middle Ages and did not seem to bear much weight. In Aquinas’s massive *Summa Theologiae*, there is only one question on *religio*; it falls amid the

seventy-six questions of the treatise on prudence and justice. Aquinas treats *religio* under the virtue of justice. *Religio* is one of the nine virtues annexed to the principal virtue justice; it is a “potential part of justice” because it renders to God what is God’s due, which is reverence or worship. However, *religio* falls short of the perfection of the virtue of justice, since it is impossible for humans to give to God an equal return.²⁵ According to Aquinas, *religio* is a moral, not a theological, virtue because “God is related to religion not as matter or object, but as end.”²⁶ God is the direct object of the theological virtue of faith. The object of *religio* is the rites and practices, both individual and communal, that offer worship to God.

Although *religio* primarily refers to orders of clergy in the medieval period, the ancient usage does still infrequently appear. Even when used as something approaching piety and reverence, however, *religio* is not what modern people refer to as religion. It is important to note what *religio* is *not* for Aquinas and for medieval Christendom more generally. First, *religio* is not a universal genus of which Christianity is a particular species. As does Augustine, Aquinas acknowledges that *religio* is found everywhere that worship is offered. Aquinas hesitates less than Augustine to limit the meaning of *religio* to the explicit worship of God or gods. Aquinas cites Cicero’s definition of religion as consisting “in offering service and ceremonial rites to a superior nature that men call divine.”²⁷ Aquinas would acknowledge that pagans worship their gods and use the word *religio* to describe it. He would also acknowledge, as did Augustine, that pagan worship contains within it an inchoate groping toward the one true God. But Michael Buckley overstates the case when he says that, for Aquinas, “[r]eligio looks to all of the acts by which God is served and worshipped as ‘*principium creationis et gubernationis rerum*,’ whether Christian or not.”²⁸ For Aquinas, pagan worship does not serve God; if pagan worship is *religio*, it is false *religio*, as in Augustine’s distinction between true and false *religiones*. Aquinas says that “it belongs to religion to show reverence to one God under one aspect, namely, as the first principle of the creation and government of things.”²⁹ He adds, “The three Divine Persons are the one principle of the creation and government of things, wherefore they are served by one religion.”³⁰ The one true *religio* worships God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Aquinas would not acknowledge a common essence of religion underlying the various manifestations of the world’s religions. Talal Asad cites the case of a fifth-century bishop who, finding the yet-to-be-Christianized peasants making offerings to their gods on the edge of a marsh, said, “There can be no religion in a swamp.” Asad comments, “For medieval Christians, religion was not a universal phenomenon: religion was a site on which universal truth was produced, and it was clear to them that truth was not produced universally.”³¹

The second thing that *religio* was *not* is a system of propositions or beliefs. Aquinas describes the end of *religio* in specifically Christian Trinitarian language, but the main point is not about different religions holding different doctrines. In the medieval era, Christianity is not a religion to be set aside or against other religions, other systems of propositions about the nature of things and their attendant rites, e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism. Doctrine is not unimportant for cultivating true *religio*, but Christian *religio* is not a system of propositions about reality. It is a *virtue*, a disposition of the person which elevates the person's action into participation in the life of the Trinity. As a virtue, Christian *religio* is a type of *habitus*, a disposition of the person toward moral excellence produced by highly specific disciplines of body and soul.³² *Religio* is not so much a matter of learning certain correct universal propositions about the world, but of being formed in bodily habits. As Asad comments in his study of medieval monasticism:

The formation/transformation of moral dispositions (Christian virtues) depended on more than the capacity to imagine, to perceive, to imitate—which, after all, are abilities everyone possesses in varying degree. It required a particular program of disciplinary practices. The rites that were prescribed by that program did not simply evoke or release universal emotions, they aimed to construct and reorganize distinctive emotions—desire (*cupiditas/caritas*), humility (*humilitas*), remorse (*contritio*)—on which the central Christian virtue of obedience to God depended. This point must be stressed, because the emotions mentioned here are not universal human feelings. . . . They are historically specific emotions that are structured internally and related to each other in historically determined ways. And they are the product not of mere readings of symbols but of processes of power.³³

The third thing that *religio* is *not*, in other words, is a purely interior impulse secreted away in the human soul. Christian *religio* is a set of skills that become “second nature” through habituated disciplines of body and soul. Monasticism, guided by the Rule of St. Benedict, is the most refined form of *religio*, such that Aquinas could identify monastic life as religious life proper.³⁴ But *religio* was not limited to monastic life. All Christian *religio* was impressed upon the body and soul by the kinds of disciplines St. Benedict prescribes. For Aquinas, *religio* incorporates both the piety of the worshipper and the external rites and disciplines of the worship. *Religio* does not differ essentially from sanctity, but differs logically, in that *religio* refers to communal and individual rites that offer worship to God: “The word religion is usually used to signify

the activity by which man gives the proper reverence to God through actions which specifically pertain to divine worship, such as sacrifice, oblations, and the like.”³⁵ Sanctity includes both these and “the works of the other virtues by which one is disposed to the worship of God.”³⁶ Aquinas devotes one article to showing that *religio* includes an external act. Although he says that the internal acts of *religio* take precedence over the external rites, the external rites are not expendable or superfluous, for “the human mind, in order to be united to God, needs to be guided by the sensible world, since *invisible things... are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made*, as the Apostle says [Rom. 1:20].”³⁷

For Aquinas, *religio* is a virtue, and virtue is a type of habit, and habits are caused by the repetition of acts.³⁸ Such acts necessarily involve the body, which is not merely a container for the soul; soul and body are one psychosomatic unity, with the soul not a separate thing, but the “form” of the body.³⁹ This viewpoint is not peculiar to Thomas Aquinas, but is shared by medieval Christendom more generally. In the writings of Hugh of St. Victor, for example:

[I]t is discipline imposed on the body which forms virtue. Body and spirit are but one: disordered movements of the former betray outwardly (*foris*) the disarranged interior (*intus*) of the soul. But inversely, “discipline” can act on the soul through the body—in ways of dressing (*in habitu*), in posture and movement (*in gestu*), in speech (*in locutione*), and in table manners (*in mensa*).⁴⁰

What *religio* is *not* for medieval Christians, fourthly, is an “institutional force” separable from other nonreligious, or secular, forces. When Kimball says that religion has caused more violence than any other institutional force throughout history, we must ask what those institutional forces might be. In other words, to what is religion being compared in the premodern context? Is Christian religion being compared to, for example, Muslim religion? No, Kimball’s claim is about religion as such, not just Christian religion. Is religion being compared to other virtues, say, fortitude or prudence? Virtues do not seem to be what Kimball has in mind by “institutional forces.” Besides, in the medieval context, any attempt to isolate one virtue from another as the cause of some social effect like violence is not likely to bear much fruit. Aquinas devotes a question of the *Summa Theologiae* to showing the deep interconnection of the virtues, such that, as Saint Thomas quotes Gregory, “one virtue without the other is either of no account whatever, or very imperfect.”⁴¹ According to Aquinas, the moral virtues “qualify one another by a kind of overflow.”⁴²

For similar reasons, any attempt to compare religion to politics or economics or some other such institutional force in medieval Christendom is unlikely to bear fruit. This comparison seems to be what Kimball and others mean when they say that religion has caused *more* violence in human history. However, *religio* was not a separate sphere of concern and activity, but permeated all the institutions and activities of medieval Christendom. In fact, Aquinas says, “Every deed, in so far as it is done in God’s honor, belongs to religion, not as eliciting, but as commanding.”⁴³ He explains the difference between eliciting and commanding in these terms:

Religion has two kinds of acts. Some are its proper and immediate acts, which it elicits, and by which man is directed to God alone, for instance, sacrifice, adoration and the like. But it has other acts, which it produces through the medium of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honor of God, because the virtue which is concerned with the end, commands the virtues which are concerned with the means.⁴⁴

For Aquinas, *religio* did not belong to a separate, “supernatural” realm of activity; not until Francisco de Suárez’s work at the dawn of the seventeenth century was *religio* identified as *supernaturalis*.⁴⁵ *Religio* was not separable—even in theory—from political activity in Christendom. Medieval Christendom was a theopolitical whole. This does not mean, of course, that there was no division of labor between kings and priests, nor that that division was not constantly contested. It does mean, however, that the end of *religio* was inseparable from the end of politics. Aquinas explains that human government is directed toward the end of virtuous living.⁴⁶ For this reason, the king must possess virtue; justice easily degenerates into tyranny unless the king is “a very virtuous man.”⁴⁷ More specifically, prudence and justice (the latter includes *religio*) are the virtues most proper to a king.⁴⁸ The virtuous life of the assembled people—care of which pertains to the king—is not in itself the ultimate end of human life, which is the enjoyment of God. This ultimate end is in the direct care of the priests, to whom kings should be subordinate. Nevertheless, the virtuous living to which kings direct their subjects is an intermediate end which is directed toward the ultimate end: “Since society must have the same end as the individual man, it is not the ultimate end of an assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living to attain to the possession of God.”⁴⁹ Acts of governing well, in other words, are directed toward the same end toward which *religio* is directed, and true *religio* is integral to good governing. For this reason, Aquinas rejects the idea that non-Christians should have political authority over Christians.⁵⁰

Is religion being compared to a secular realm of activity when it is claimed that religion has caused *more* violence than any other institutional force throughout history? Certainly, the modern claim that religion causes more violence than something else depends upon the existence of a sphere of non-religion, a secular realm. As should be obvious, however, there was no such secular sphere until it was invented in modernity. The organic image of the body of Christ was fused with a hierarchical ordering of estates. There was no part of Christendom that stood outside of the holistic, sacralized order.

Nothing in the above analysis of the history of the term *religio* either disproves or proves the thesis that medieval Christendom was more violent than modern society. One may wish to argue that the invention of the religious-secular duality was, on the whole, a good thing, and that societies with such a distinction are to be preferred to societies organized like medieval Christendom. But basing such a preference on the inherent violence of religion throughout history invites anachronistic nonsense. The point is not that religion was mixed up with secular pursuits until modernity separated them. The point is that there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion waiting to be separated from the secular like a precious metal from its ore. The term *religio* functioned in very different ways as part of a complex of power relations and subjectivities unique to medieval Christendom. Very different relations of power were involved in the invention of the twin categories of religion and the secular. The problem with transhistorical and transcultural definitions of religion is not just that all phenomena identified as religious are historically specific, but that the definitions themselves are historical products that are part of specific configurations of power.⁵¹

The Invention of Religion in the West

In the medieval application of the term, *religio* was primarily used to differentiate clergy who were members of orders from diocesan clergy. Secondly, *religio* named one relatively minor virtue in a complex of other practices that assumed the particular context of the Christian church and the Christian social order. With the dawn of modernity, however, a new concept with a much wider and different significance came to operate under the term religion. Religion in modernity indicates a universal genus of which the various religions are species; each religion comes to be demarcated by a system of propositions; religion is identified with an essentially interior, private impulse; and religion comes to be seen as essentially distinct from secular pursuits such as politics, economics, and the like. The rise of the concept of religion

thus establishes Christianity's proper sphere as the interior life, without direct access to the political. As Smith remarks, "the rise of the concept of 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself."⁵² What he means is that the invention of the modern concept of religion accompanies the decline of the church as the public, communal practice of the virtue of *religio*. The rise of religion is accompanied by the rise of its twin, the secular realm, a pairing which will gradually remove the practice of Christian *religio* from a central place in the social order of the West.

The creation of the modern category of religion begins in the Renaissance, with two Christian Platonist thinkers taking a central role. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) uses *religio* to indicate the various ways in which God is worshipped; there are Jewish, Christian, and Arabic religions, that is Jewish, Christian, and Arabic ways of worshipping God, though there are as yet no religions called Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.⁵³ What is novel about Cusa's use of *religio* is that ritual practices are not essential to it; *religio* is a universal, interior impulse that stands behind the multiplicity of rites. Shaken by the violent fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, Cusa wrote his treatise *De Pace Fidei* in an attempt to arrive at some principle of concord among the peoples of the earth, who worshipped in so many different ways. Burdened by the cares of the body, people were unable to come to a pure knowledge of the hidden God. God had therefore provided them with various prophets, each of whom had taught the same wisdom, but in different customs and languages: "Yet human nature has this weakness, that after a long passage of time certain customs are gradually accepted and defended as immutable truths."⁵⁴ What became obscured was that "there is, in spite of many varieties of rites, but one religion."⁵⁵ This one religion is the one wisdom toward which all beliefs and observances—some inchoately, others clearly and explicitly—point. Even the worship of many gods admits of one wisdom. A unity of rite might be the ideal, but in practice diversity of rites may be tolerated and even encouraged, "since in many cases a particular religion would actually be more vigilant in guarding what it considers to be the noblest way of manifesting its devotion to you [God] as its King"; so God is beseeched to "let there be in the same manner one religion and one cult of divine worship."⁵⁶ Religion here is clearly not identified with rites or the bodily disciplines proper to virtue, but with an interior wisdom that underlies all rites. What is needed to make this implicit concord explicit is that "man would have to walk according to his interior rather than his exterior nature."⁵⁷ The "interior man" is one who relies on supersensible reason: "all who use their reason have one religion and cult which is at the bottom of all the diversity of rites."⁵⁸

Cusa was a Christian who believed both that Christ as the word was the source and mediator of wisdom, and that the common essence of religion was in reality faith in Christ. The one religion to which all rites point is not a kind of spiritual Esperanto. The sparks of wisdom found in each people's rites were put there by God to facilitate the eventual acceptance of faith in Christ by all nations. However, faith in Christ is not dependent upon any particular rites or particular practices, but underlies their diversity. Cusa's conception of religion, therefore, is a significant departure from the medieval use of the term as a virtue embedded in particular bodily disciplines. In Cusa, we see the beginnings of religion as an interior impulse that is universal to human beings and therefore stands behind the multiplicity of exterior rites that express it. Cusa, however, still wants to identify that universal impulse with Christianity in its revealed form. Nevertheless, Cusa's position is a precursor to the hitherto unknown idea that there is a single genus of human activity called religion, of which Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc., are the various species.

The second major Renaissance contributor to the creation of religion was Marsilio Ficino, the man responsible for the first full Latin translation of Plato's *Dialogues*. The title of Ficino's 1474 work, *De Christiana Religione*, was one of the first uses of this phrase. By it, he did not mean "the Christian religion" in the sense of a system of doctrines and practices to be set aside from the other world religions. *Religio* meant something like piety. What distinguishes his usage of the term *religio* from the ancient and medieval usages is that it is both interiorized and universalized. It is located as a natural, innate impulse of the human heart, indeed *the* fundamental human characteristic common to all. The essence of religion is thus an unchanging constant across time and space in all human societies: "all opinions of men, all their responses, all their customs, change—except *religio*."⁵⁹ *Religio* is distinguished from external actions or rites, which, as in Cusa, are multiple. Unlike Cusa, however, Ficino believes that this variety of rites is ordained by God to give beauty to the world. Each external form of worship is a more or less true approximation of the Platonic ideal. Ficino also differs from Cusa in that Ficino did not regard Christ as the true content of the universal religion. For Ficino, the "Christian" in "the Christian religion" meant "pertaining to Christ." Those who come the closest to the ideal worship of God are those who worship as Christ did; this is the practice of Christian religion, that is, Christ's way of worshipping God. There is only one universal *religio* implanted in the human heart, but there are different degrees of genuineness in living it out. The highest degree is exemplified by Christ. In Ficino's eyes, any faith can be "Christian" religion, even with no connection to the historical Christian revelation or church.⁶⁰

The move toward religion as an interior and universal impulse would be complemented in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by an emphasis on belief over practice. Religion would come to mean a system of doctrines, intellectual propositions that could be either true or false. In the work of French humanist Guillaume Postel, for example, we find the idea that certain essential propositions are central to all of the world's religions. In his *De orbis terrae concordia* (1544), Postel listed sixty-seven such propositions that are common to all religions and around which the people of the world could unite, if only they would shed the superfluous externalities of rite and practice. If people could agree on these first principles, agreement on the final truths would come easily. The end result of such agreement would be that people would not be papists, Lutherans, or adherents of any particular religion, but would simply invoke the name of Jesus.⁶¹

In the interest of promoting universal concord, Postel uses religions in the plural to talk about “the diversity of customs, languages, opinions, and religions”⁶² of the world's people, and religion in the singular to refer to the concord underlying all of the various religions. He thus comes close to introducing the idea that Christianity, Islam, etc., are species of the genus religion, but he persists in identifying true religion with Christian religion. Nevertheless, he makes an important distinction between “the narrow worship of the external church”⁶³ and the internal, mystical church that includes all of the world's people. Postel does not thereby dismiss the external church, with its rites and disciplines of the body, as unnecessary; he believes that the external church is the primary instrument to unite the human race. But the external church has become merely instrumental to the pursuit of agreement on the common propositions of true religion.⁶⁴

The internal-external and belief-practice binaries were crucial to the continued formation of the religious-secular binary in the sixteenth century. This can be seen in dramatic form in sixteenth-century England, where reformers such as Thomas Becon were intent on purifying religion of dependence on the external physical world.⁶⁵ The 1552 version of the Book of Common Prayer published under Edward VI denied “any reall and essencial presence” in the Eucharist and spoke instead of feeding “in the heart by faith.”⁶⁶ As Graham Ward comments, prior to this period, the *saeculum* had no autonomy from a religious realm. Stripping away the liturgical understanding of the world had a profound impact on the reconfiguration of power and subjectivity in sixteenth-century England:

To rethink the sacraments and ceremonies as symbols or “mere outward forms” (1549 Book of Common Prayer) was to transform

the nature of materiality itself, rendering the natural world opaque, silent and inert. . . . A new space and a new understanding of the body were emerging, a space and a body in which God's presence was only available through the eyes of faith—and faith understood as a set of doctrinal principles to be taught, a set of interpretive keys to be passed down, passed on, for one's experience in the world.⁶⁷

According to Peter Harrison, the transition to religion as a state of mind can be mapped especially clearly among Calvinists. For John Calvin, *religio* retained its medieval meaning as a worshipful disposition of the person, but in Calvinist circles there came to be an emphasis on religion as saving knowledge. For Calvin's followers, saving knowledge was understood in the context of election and predestination. Saving knowledge was not a grasp of doctrinal facts that guaranteed salvation, but was rather a knowledge of God's will, the assurance that one had been chosen by God to be among the saved. In time, however, saving knowledge came to indicate a body of objective truths to which the believer could assent or withhold assent. According to Harrison, the Calvinist preoccupation with knowledge and belief can in part be traced to Calvin's rejection of the Catholic doctrine of "implicit faith," that is, the idea that simpler and less educated Christians did not need to understand abstruse doctrines such as the Trinity, but merely have faith that the doctors of the church had gotten it right.⁶⁸ The Reformation's democratization of the church, in other words, meant less emphasis on mystery and more emphasis on the perspicuity of the faith.

The emphasis on religion as doctrine would receive impetus from the Arminian controversy at the end of the sixteenth century. Sensitive to the problems that Calvin's double predestinarianism created for the idea of human free will, Jacobius Arminius proposed a conditional predestination which sought to allow human agents to play a role in their salvation without giving the impression of earning it. For Arminius, human freedom came in the act of intellectual assent—a mere "I believe"—to certain central Christian doctrines. No moral acts or works were required of the human agent, thus avoiding the charge of Pelagianism that Calvin had so wanted to avoid. As a result, however, the tendency to reduce religion to assent to doctrine was magnified.⁶⁹ When Arminius's patron Hugo Grotius wrote *De Veritate Religionis Christianae* in the early seventeenth century, his purpose was to show that the Christian religion was *the* true religion, meaning that its doctrines were statements of fact. Grotius was therefore able to say that the Christian religion teaches, rather than simply is, the correct worship of God.⁷⁰

The Reformation brought in its wake numerous attempts to encapsulate Christian faith in a set of beliefs to be confessed. The Thirty-Nine Articles, the

Lambeth Articles, and the Westminster Confession come immediately to mind. The seventeenth century in addition saw an explosion of books and pamphlets attempting to present “the Christian Religion,” “the Protestant Religion,” “the true Catholic Religion,” or simply “Religion” in propositional form. Such efforts culminated in Nicholas Gibbon’s attempt to present the Christian religion in a “scheme or diagram” that occupied one single printed page.⁷¹ Obviously, such attempts were inspired by the context of competing Christian confessions following the Reformation. For polemical purposes, one needed to be able to state the differences between confessions clearly and succinctly.

There developed, therefore, the idea of religions in the plural. The idea of Lutheranism, Catholicism, and Calvinism as different religions was not a sixteenth-century notion. The phrase *cuius regio, eius religio*, usually associated with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, was in fact invented by a German jurist around 1600 and could not have been used by the writers of the treaty.⁷² Even Jean Bodin’s *Colloquium heptaplomeres*—a discussion, written in the 1580s, among fictional representatives of Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and natural religions—used *religio* in the older sense of styles of worship, not as abstract systems of doctrines.⁷³ The earliest form of pluralization in the modern sense is found in the 1590s, with Richard Hooker from the Anglican side and Robert Parsons from the Catholic side writing about religions as objective and opposing sets of doctrines.⁷⁴

After 1600, it became possible to speak of religion in general, although it was usually used to refer to “the Christian religion,” which indicated that the various religions in Christendom were true or false forms of an abstract essence of Christianity.⁷⁵ As the seventeenth century progressed, it became possible to see Christianity as one species of the genus religion, there being, as Thomas Browne wrote in 1642–1643, “a Geography of Religions, as of Lands.”⁷⁶ As Bossy summarizes the result:

By 1700, the world was full of religions, objective social and moral entities characterised by system, principles and hard edges, which could be envisaged by Voltaire as cutting one another’s throats. Above their multiplicity planed a shadowy abstraction, *the Christian Religion*, and somewhere above that, in an upper region of the classifying system, religion with a capital “R,” planted in its new domain by people who did not usually feel or believe in it.⁷⁷

At the same time, according to Bossy, “Christianity” was moving from meaning a body of people to meaning an “ism” or body of beliefs.⁷⁸

The location of religion in beliefs or states of mind was the work not only of Protestant and Catholic polemicists but also of those who put forth proposals

for toleration. Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1633), one of the most prominent of the early modern theorists of religion, attempted to reach a concord among all the world's religions by identifying the five essential beliefs of religion as such:

1. That there is some supreme divinity.
2. That this divinity ought to be worshipped.
3. That virtue joined with piety is the best method of divine worship.
4. That we should return to our right selves from sins.
5. That reward or punishment is bestowed after this life is finished.⁷⁹

Herbert thought that peace could be achieved among the world's various sects if people would only see that, underlying the various forms of life, rites, and traditions, everyone in fact acknowledged, either implicitly or explicitly, the same basic universal propositions, which he called the "common notions" concerning religion. All of the various religions were species of one universal genus, and "no period or nation is without religion."⁸⁰ Herbert was ready to submit all things to the judgment of the "truly catholic Church."⁸¹ Herbert even went so far as to say that "it is only through this Church that salvation is possible."⁸² This church, however, was not a community, institution, spiritual discipline, or integrated way of life but a set of propositions: "The only Catholic and uniform Church is the doctrine of Common Notions which comprehends all places and all men."⁸³ As such, salvation was immediately accessible to all, without need for the rites, scriptures, bodily disciplines, traditions, and communal guidance of any particular body of people.⁸⁴

Herbert lays out the epistemological basis for his ideas on religion in his most important work, *De Veritate*, which appeared in 1624 and had a profound influence on Grotius, Descartes, and Locke. As Descartes would later do, Herbert tries to base his search for truth not on the perceptions of the senses but on the immediate apprehensions of the mind: "I have undertaken in this work only to rely on truths which are not open to dispute but are derived from the evidence of immediate perception and admitted by the whole world."⁸⁵ Herbert discovers in the mind a faculty which he calls "natural instinct," whose function is to provide us with an immediate apprehension of the divine. This apprehension is pure and is prior to sense perception, to experience, and even to reasoning. The five common notions issue directly from the natural instinct and are innate. It is not that the content of the common notions is given to every mind at birth, but that every mind will arrive at them if it is functioning normally without external impediment.⁸⁶ The common notions "by no means depend on some faith or tradition, but have been engraved on the human mind by God, and . . . have been considered and acknowledged as true throughout the

world, by every age.”⁸⁷ The practices of authority and tradition give way entirely to introspection. Amid the cacophony of different voices, each holding up their own particular human traditions as true and necessary and condemning the others as false, the individual is to retreat into the self and find true religion there: “since it is proper to the lofty soul, let him everywhere distinguish by the appropriate faculties internal things from external, certain from uncertain, divine from human. Nay, let him rather with serene unshaken mind despise other things, and amid the threatenings poured out over the entire world let him escape undaunted, self-possessed.”⁸⁸

Any particular doctrines and rites that arise in positive religions are a dilution of the original purity of the natural instinct as it becomes weighed down by the body and the material world. At best, such additions to pure religion are beneficial exemplifications of the underlying universal religion. Herbert seems to have regarded the particularities of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection in such a light, which earned him the label Father of English Deism. At worst, however, the particularities of the various religions are to be considered accretions and corruptions which distort the “perfect sphere of the religion of God.”⁸⁹ Such impostures are introduced by the priestly classes for their own gain and control of the ignorant masses. Herbert is extremely critical of the priests of every religion, even as he spies evidence that the common notions are to be found underneath all the rubbish of history.⁹⁰ Herbert would not do away with all rites and priestly “externals,” but would retain “the more becoming rites and ceremonies” in the hope that concentration on the common notions would lead to a “more austere, more logical worship.”⁹¹ Herbert allows that, in permitting the great diversity of religions over time and space, God must have had a good purpose in mind.⁹² Nevertheless, he seems at a loss to say what that good purpose is and turns for assurance instead to the unchanging nature of true religion:

Granted then that He has subjected all things to a series of causes acting each one upon the next, yet some things He has ordained unchangeable from the beginning of time. It is therefore clear enough, finally, that in whatever circumstance matters are altered, yet the stuff whence their existence is derived is in no way destroyed, nor the time which is their measure put aside, nor the space in which they are placed done away with, nor the plan whence comes their order changed. Vainly therefore would you seek for anything new in God. For though all things are modified by their mutual relations, yet they assume no change inconsistent with the order of nature.⁹³

The idea that religion is transhistorical and transcultural is crucial for Herbert, despite the problems that it causes for him. If all people in all times and places have access to the same universal propositions, why do people not in fact agree? Herbert follows the above passage by making clear that these truths “escape the eyes of those who grope in darkness” because of free will.⁹⁴ Natural instinct does not preempt the faculty of free choice. It is to be expected, then, that due to a certain tendency to depravity, some may fall into darkness. But Herbert makes clear that universality is ultimately independent of any empirical measure of the way that people actually behave. Truth is attained by introspection, not by the mere gathering of data. Herbert repeatedly asserts that natural instinct arrives at the common notions in “normal men”:⁹⁵

It is not what a large number of men assert, but what all men of normal mind believe, that I find important. Scanning the vast array of absurd fictions I am content to discover a tiny Common Notion. And this is of the utmost importance, since when the general mass of men have rejected a whole range of beliefs which it has found valueless, it proceeds to acquire new beliefs by this method, until the point is reached where faith can be applied.⁹⁶

Herbert is confident, in other words, that the masses will eventually come around to the purity of his five common notions, but the truth of the common notions is independent of how people believe and behave.

The main problem with this scheme, as Peter Harrison puts it, is that it is unfalsifiable. Whenever evidence is adduced that certain people at certain times or in certain places do not in fact hold to the five notions common to all human beings, such people are simply declared abnormal.⁹⁷ In constructing an a priori religion in the minds of all people, Herbert has made his theory impervious to empirical evidence. All evidence is seen and interpreted through the lens of his religious view a priori. Herbert’s scheme creates its own world, with its own boundaries between what is normal and what is not. Herbert is not discovering the timeless essence of religion, but is helping to create a new reality, a new normality, by identifying a timeless religion that is interior, universal, nonmaterial, and essentially distinct from the political. This is not only true of Herbert. Attempts to construct religion as a universal, timeless, interior, and apolitical human impulse in the early modern period are willy-nilly part of the creation of new configurations of power, especially the subordination of ecclesiastical power to that of the emergent state.

It is important to note that Herbert’s interiorization and universalization of religion go hand in hand with his support of state control over the church. This may seem like a contradiction, but Herbert has no intention of privatizing

worship. Herbert's scheme for toleration is part of a larger shift toward the absorption of ecclesiastical power by the rising state in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, served the English Crown as ambassador to France and wrote a history of King Henry VIII and a short paper in English, "On the King's Supremacy in the Church."⁹⁸ In the latter document, in looking over the biblical and historical record, he finds that "noe Change of Religion, during the Reigne of their Kings did follow, which was not procured by their immediate power,"⁹⁹ an echo of the policy of *cuius regio, eius religio*. He also argues that "it is unsafe to diuide the people, betwixt temporall, and spirituall obedience, or suspend them, betwixt the Terrours of a secular death, and Eternall punishments."¹⁰⁰ The distinction between religion and the secular in these two passages is not yet a distinction between private and public. The private *origin* of religion in the individual's intuition of the common notions, however, allows for the state to enforce order by reducing religion to five relatively innocuous propositions and an "austere" public worship stripped of most of its formative power. As Herbert explains in *De Religione Laici*, his thesis

procures for religion, and thence for the hierarchy and the state, an unquestioned authority and majesty. For since there is no clear occasion for stealing away from this undoubted doctrine, all men will be unanimously eager for the austere worship of God by virtue, for piety, and for a holy life, and putting aside hatreds along with controversies about religion they will agree on that mutual token of faith, they will be received into that intimate religious relationship; so that if insolent spirits revolt on account of some portion of it the spiritual or secular magistracy will have the best right to punish them.¹⁰¹

The creation of religion reduced to five inoffensive propositions thus comes with the concomitant power of the state to police the boundaries of religion and punish anyone whose more substantive version of Christianity would challenge the authority of the state and the state church.

With John Locke, we find a more recognizably liberal version of toleration. For Locke, as for Herbert, religion is primarily a state of mind: "All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind."¹⁰² For this reason, Locke denies to the magistrate any power to enforce religion, because the magistrate cannot penetrate the inner reaches of the personal conscience where true religion resides. Locke draws a distinction between the "outward force" used by the civil magistrate and the "inward persuasion" of religion, and he argues that "such is the nature of the understanding that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force."¹⁰³ This sharp distinction between inward and outward would be unrecognizable in medieval

Christendom, where the state of the interior soul was inseparable from the bodily disciplines and rituals that both formed and expressed the dispositions of the soul. Locke also differed from the Calvinists for whom “saving knowledge” was public and objective. For Locke, the speculative truths of religion cannot be settled by any public authority, neither that of the church nor of the magistrate. There is one true way to eternal happiness, says Locke, and religion is essentially about discovering the saving truths that reveal this way.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, controversies over this way among churches are intractable,¹⁰⁵ and the magistrate offers no help; “neither the care of the commonwealth nor the right enacting of laws does discover this way that leads to heaven more certainly to the magistrate than every private man’s search and study discovers it unto himself.”¹⁰⁶ True religion, therefore, is essentially a private matter of uncovering saving knowledge: “Those things that every man ought sincerely to inquire into himself, and by meditation, study, search, and his own endeavors attain the knowledge of, cannot be looked upon as the peculiar possession of any sort of men.”¹⁰⁷

Locke’s scheme for toleration does not result in a strict privatization of Christian worship and practice. Locke continues to assume the context of a state church engaged in public acts of worship. But Locke seeks to promote civil concord by establishing a strict division of labor between the state, whose interests are public in origin, and the church, whose interests are private in origin, thereby clearing a public space for purely secular concerns:

I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men’s souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth.¹⁰⁸

Locke defines the commonwealth in terms of the promotion of civil interests, and civil interests he defines as “life, liberty, health, and indolency of the body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like.”¹⁰⁹ Violence can be used by the magistrate for the securing of civil interests,¹¹⁰ but violence has no place in the advancement of “true religion,” especially among followers of Christ, the prince of peace.¹¹¹ The church is a “voluntary society of men,”¹¹² but obedience to the state is not voluntary:

The end of a religious society . . . is the public worship of God and, by means thereof, the acquisition of eternal life. All discipline ought therefore to tend to that end, and all ecclesiastical laws to be

thereunto confined. Nothing ought nor can be transacted in this society relating to the possession of civil and worldly goods. No force is here to be made use of upon any occasion whatsoever. For force belongs wholly to the civil magistrate, and the possession of all outward goods is subject to his jurisdiction.¹¹³

Again, the contrast with the medieval Christian context is sharp. The idea that a “religious society” has no say over how civil and worldly goods are handled would be entirely foreign not only to the craft guilds whose work revolved around the liturgy,¹¹⁴ but also to the monastic communities whose vows were not merely a dispossession of all concern for worldly goods, but a recognition that the religious life is intimately entwined with how one interacts with such goods.

In Locke, we find a modern version of the spatial division of the world into religious and secular pursuits.¹¹⁵ In the medieval period, the *saeculum* had both a temporal and spatial dimension; it referred to this world and age, and *saecula saeculorum* was translated in English as “world without end.” The *saeculum* was all of creation, written into the providential plan of God. It did not refer to some spatial area of interest autonomous from the church’s concern. In the suggestive words of Edward Bailey, “It was in the secular that religion revealed its reality, as religion rather than as hobby (or fantasy, or hobby-horse).”¹¹⁶ When the opposition of religious clergy to secular clergy was transferred to the new conception of religion in the early modern era, however, the secular retained its oppositional character and became that which is not religious in the modern sense. The new religious-secular dichotomy fit into the modern state’s individualist anthropology, as typified by Locke. As Ezra Kopelowitz remarks:

The distinction between the “religious” and the “secular” occurs in societies in which the individual, rather than [the] group is the primary component of social organization. The rise of the individual as the basis of social organization corresponds with the expansion of the centralized modern state, with its strong legal-rational bureaucracy that treats individuals and not groups as the primary source of social rights. Before the rise of the centralized state . . . “religion” was not a distinct social category that a person could choose or reject. You were born into a group, of which ceremony and symbols rooted in doctrine (religious content) were an integral part of public life.¹¹⁷

Although Kopelowitz persists in spying a “religious content” underlying medieval forms, his overall point is accurate: the religious-secular binary is a new creation that accompanies the creation of the modern state.

This brief tour is not intended to be a complete history of the development of the idea of religion in the Renaissance and early modern periods. It should be sufficient to show, nevertheless, that the idea of religion *has a history*. The first of the two conclusions for which I set out in this chapter to provide evidence is that religion is not transhistorical and transcultural. In the next section of this chapter, I will show that religion is not transcultural. For now, we can conclude that it is not transhistorical. To say, as Kimball and Rouner do, that religion has done this or that throughout history is in fact to ignore history. There was a time when religion, as modern people use the term, was not, and then it was invented. In the premodern West, there simply was no conception that Christianity was a species of the genus religion, a universal, interior human impulse, reducible to propositions or beliefs, essentially distinct from secular pursuits such as politics and economics. The point is not simply that religion has changed over time, that it used to be a particular virtue tied up with bodily disciplines in the medieval period and became a universal, interior impulse in the modern era, nor that we used not to separate religion and politics, and now we do. To say this would be to persist in maintaining that there is something lurking underneath the changes that identifies all of the various manifestations as religion. To say this, in other words, would be to say that, despite the differences between medieval *religio* and modern religion, it is still essentially the same thing that has changed. But we have seen that *religio* and religion are *not* the same thing. There is no reason to suppose that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two. *Religio* in medieval Christendom, as we have seen, was mainly used to distinguish clergy in orders from diocesan clergy. To the limited extent that *religio* referred to piety or some such disposition, it was a specific virtue of the Christian life—a minor one, at that—one of nine subvirtues attached to the principal virtue of justice, itself one of the four cardinal (not theological) virtues. Religion in modernity, on the other hand, is said to be half of the religious-secular binary into which all human pursuits are divided. Structurally, the relative importance of the terms and the places they occupy in their respective contexts are not equivalent. There is no reason to suppose that medieval *religio* simply morphed into modern religion and that, underneath the changes, it has the same essential qualities. There are, of course, commonalities between medieval *religio* and modern religion, but *religio* as a virtue also has commonalities with modern concepts such as public allegiance, civic obligation, justice, public virtue, and a host of other concepts and practices that modernity categorizes as political.

I am not merely making a nominalist contention that every individual thing is different from everything else and no two things can share a common

essence. Of course, there are commonalities and continuities among ancient, medieval, and modern ideas and practices. But the relevant commonality necessary to make Kimball's and Rouner's case—the separability of religion from politics, economics, culture, and other institutional forces in ancient and medieval times—is absent from the historical record. How could they make their case empirically? How would one go about showing, from empirical evidence, that religion has caused more violence than any other institutional force in history, when the distinction is absent from premodern cultures? How would one compare religion to politics or economics as causes of warfare in, say, the tenth-century Holy Roman Empire, when no one at the time thought or acted as if there were any such relevant distinction? One would simply have to claim the ability to spy religion lurking there, based on little more than an a priori faith that religion is found at all times in all places. Like Lord Herbert's thesis, such essentialist accounts of religion may be impervious to empirical disproof, but they are also impossible to prove without a prior commitment to finding religion in the complex historical traces left behind by people who arranged their world in a very different way than we do. It may be helpful, under certain circumstances, to use modern terms to describe premodern realities, even if the premodern actors did not think in such terms. But one would have to be clear that such terms are used as a modern way of framing the discussion and not as the discovery of modern realities lurking underneath a premodern disguise.

The problem here is not just one of misdescription or anachronism. The deeper problem is that essentialist accounts of religion occlude the way that power is involved in the shifting uses of concepts such as religion. One of the significant disadvantages of essentialist readings of religion, in other words, is that they ignore or distort changes in how the world is arranged. Major shifts in terms and practices are accompanied by shifts in the way that authority and power are distributed, and transhistorical conceptions of religion tend to obscure rather than illuminate these shifts. This is the second conclusion I have set out to show. The problem is not simply that differences are underplayed in order to identify the essential sameness of religion in all times and places. The deeper problem is that transhistorical accounts of religion are themselves implicated in shifts in the way the authority and power are distributed, while claiming to be purely descriptive.

Take, for example, John Locke's account of what he is up to when he defines religion as essentially interior. Locke does not appear to think that his attempt "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion" is involved in the creation of something new. He describes it instead as an attempt to clarify and separate two essentially distinct types of human

endeavor that have somehow gotten mixed up together. The church, whose business is religion alone, has overstepped its boundaries:

[T]he church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies, which are in their original, end, business, and in everything perfectly distinct and infinitely different from each other.¹¹⁸

Like Herbert, Locke thought he was uncovering the timeless essence of religion. Obscured by this rhetoric is the fact that both Herbert and Locke in the seventeenth century were witnessing and contributing to the rise of a new configuration of power hitherto unknown. The advent of the modern state, with its concept of sovereignty and its absorption of many of the powers of the old ecclesiastical regime, was proving that the boundaries were anything but fixed and immovable. The relationships between church and civil authorities were complex and constantly shifting throughout the centuries of Christendom. As for the contrast between religion and civil interests, we can go further and say not only that the boundaries shifted, but that there simply was no such relevant contrast before Locke and others invented it. The very claim that the boundaries between religion and nonreligion are natural, eternal, fixed, and immutable *is itself* a part of the new configuration of power that comes about with the rise of the modern state. The new state's claim to a monopoly on violence, lawmaking, and public allegiance within a given territory depends upon either the absorption of the church into the state or the relegation of the church to an essentially private realm. Key to this move is the contention that the church's business is religion. Religion must appear, therefore, not as what the church is left with once it has been stripped of earthly relevance, but as the timeless and essential human endeavor to which the church's pursuits should always have been confined.

Transhistorical accounts of religion arose in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries as part of a new configuration of Christian societies in which many legislative and jurisdictional powers and claims to power—as well as claims to the devotion and allegiance of the people—were passing from the church to the new sovereign state. The new conception of religion would help to “purify” the church of powers and claims that were not its proper function. The historical process of secularization and the separation of church and state were by no means uncontested or complete in these or the centuries following. In the wake of the Reformation, princes and kings tended to claim authority over the church in their realms, as in Luther's Germany and Henry VIII's

England. But this was already a significant departure from the medieval ecclesiastical order, in which, in theory at least, the civil authorities were “the police department of the Church.”¹¹⁹ The new conception of religion helped to facilitate the shift to state dominance over the church by distinguishing inward religion from the bodily disciplines of the state. The new subject is thus able to do due service to both, without conflict. Those unable to so distinguish—for example, Roman Catholics whose allegiance to the pope prevented them from accepting the king’s supremacy over the church—have simply misunderstood the true and unchanging nature of religion. For this reason, Locke excludes Roman Catholics from his scheme of toleration, for they have designs on civil power “upon pretense of religion.”¹²⁰ True religion cannot have designs on civil power because it is essentially distinct from the political.

William Arnal draws an explicit link between modern conceptions of religion and the rise of the modern liberal state forecast by Locke:

Our definitions of religion, especially insofar as they assume a privatized and cognitive character behind religion (as in religious *belief*), simply reflect (and assume as normative) the West’s distinctive historical feature of the secularized state. Religion, precisely, is *not* social, *not* coercive, *is* individual, *is* belief-oriented and so on, because in our day and age there are certain apparently free-standing cultural institutions, such as the Church, which are excluded from the political state.¹²¹

As Arnal goes on to say, our definitions of religion do not simply reflect the new reality of the modern West but help to shape it: “the very concept of religion as such—as an entity with any distinction whatsoever from other human phenomena—is a function of these same processes and historical moments that generate an individualistic concept of it.”¹²² Specifically, the concept of religion justifies the liberal state’s self-presentation as an apparatus concerned with the wholly negative function of preventing the incursion of substantive, collective ends into the public sphere: “This very definition of the modern democratic state in fact creates religion as its alter-ego: religion, as such, is the space in which and by which any substantive collective goals (salvation, righteousness, etc.) are individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality.”¹²³ Religion, as Arnal says elsewhere, is a special *political* category that marginalizes and domesticates whatever forms of collective social action happen to retain a positive or utopian orientation.¹²⁴ In the early modern era, the church was the most significant source of such social action that the state domesticated. Any attempt to break out of this segregation was condemned as dangerous and potentially violent.¹²⁵

It is crucial to underscore that the category of religion does not simply describe a new social reality but helps to bring it into being and to enforce it. Religion is a normative concept. The normative ideal that has come to define Western modernity is, in Locke's words, "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion." This ideal would eventually come to be marked by the separation of church and state. In practice, of course, the ideal is never fully realized and is always contested. Nevertheless, the dominant ideal is that the business of the church is religion, defined as essentially and eternally distinct from politics, which is the business of the state. Transhistorical definitions of religion enforce the normativity of this new arrangement; as in Herbert's work, the modern definition of religion helps to define the "normal mind." The normal mind is one that is able to penetrate to the true inward essence of religion. Those who will not separate religion from politics—many Muslims, for example—are often seen as less advanced and less rational than their "normal" Western counterparts.

The idea that there exists a transhistorical human impulse called religion with a singular tendency to promote fanaticism and violence when combined with public power is not an empirically demonstrable fact, but is itself an ideological accompaniment to the shifts in power and authority that mark the transition from the medieval to the modern in the West. There may be good reasons to prefer modern to medieval, or Western to Islamic, arrangements (though to pass wholesale judgment on entire eras or cultures is not the best way to proceed). But normative commitments should not be passed off as descriptions of fact. The idea that "religion has probably been the single most significant cause of warfare in human history" has a history of its own.

The Invention of Religion Outside the West

The theories of religious violence we encountered in chapter 1 are not only transhistorical, but transcultural as well. The genus religion extends over both time and space. Religion is seen as potentially problematic at all times and all places. Religion is not merely a Western phenomenon, but is something that is found worldwide, in the world religions of which varying lists are provided.

In this section, I will show how deeply problematic is the assumption of a transcultural essence of religion. In searching for the concept of religion outside the West, Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote, "One is tempted, indeed, to ask whether there is a closely equivalent concept in any culture that has not been influenced by the modern West." Smith gives in to this temptation, and answers the question "no."¹²⁶ Since Smith, a generation of scholars has

pursued his question and shown, in increasing detail, that his negative answer is correct. Furthermore, as in the case of Europe, the invention of religion in non-Western contexts was not accomplished in the absence of shifts in power and authority. The concept of religion was introduced outside the West in the context of European colonization, and the introduction of the concept often served the interests of the colonizers.

In their initial contacts with native peoples of the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific islands, European explorers reported, with remarkable consistency, that the local people had no religion at all. Amerigo Vespucci remarked on the lack of religion among the Caribbean peoples he encountered. Sixteenth-century conquistador Pedro Cieza de León found the Peruvians “observing no religion at all, as we understand it.” The seventeenth-century explorer Jacques Le Maire found in the Pacific islands “not the least spark of religion,” and the eighteenth-century trader William Smith reported that Africans “trouble themselves about no religion at all.” Into the nineteenth century, Europeans found among the Aborigines of Australia “nothing whatever of the character of religion, or of religious observance, to distinguish them from the beasts that perish.” As David Chidester remarks, these examples can be multiplied almost endlessly.¹²⁷ In their initial encounters, Europeans’ denying religion to indigenous peoples was a way of denying them rights. If they lacked a basic human characteristic like religion, then native peoples could be treated as subhumans without legitimate claim to life, land, and other resources in their possession.

Once the native peoples were conquered and colonized, however, it was “discovered” that they did in fact have religions after all, which were then fitted into genus-and-species taxonomies of religion. Chidester’s richly detailed work on the career of the concept of religion in southern Africa shows how the British and the Dutch denied religion to the native peoples when they were at war with them, but subsequently discovered Hottentot, Xhosa, and Zulu religions once they had been subjugated. In the Hottentot case, rebellions caused the indigenous people to oscillate between religion and no religion in the eyes of the colonizers over the course of two centuries.¹²⁸ When they were subdued, attributing religion to indigenous peoples was at once a way of depoliticizing their cultures and a way of entering their cultures into a comparative framework in which—compared to the norm of religion, Christianity—their practices would be found wanting. When religion was discovered, it was of course “primitive” religion, at the lower end of an evolutionary scale that culminated in Christianity.¹²⁹ Chidester sees the introduction of the category religion as a strategy of social control. For example, following the conquest of the Xhosa in 1857, British magistrate J. C. Warner became the first European to discover a Xhosa religion. As Warner defined it, religion was that symbol system

that provided psychological security and therefore social stability. Although Warner hoped that the Xhosa would eventually embrace Christianity, a depoliticized Xhosa religion in the meantime would help to keep the Xhosa in their place.¹³⁰

Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof's study of colonial government among the Gikuyu people of Kenya similarly shows that the term religion artificially separated out certain aspects of Gikuyu culture: "naming a certain practice or disposition religious rendered it something other than real."¹³¹ Gikuyu life centered on *magongona*, practices that protect the living from the uncharitable dead. There was very little use of *Ngai*, a term imported from the Masai that the missionaries translated as "God." Presbyterian missionaries tried to convert the highly material, experimental nature of *magongona* into a systematic set of propositions that they identified as religion. They wanted to establish Gikuyu practices on the same footing as Christianity so that they could convince the Gikuyu of the superiority of the latter. They emphasized God as lawgiver—a concept wholly absent from *Ngai*—and tried to bring the Gikuyu into a world of abstract truths governed by God-given law. At the same time that this move helped to solidify the reality of colonial law, religion as such was identified with the dematerialized relationship of the individual soul to God. As Peterson comments:

[R]eligion was supposed to be an otherworldly belief system, a contract agreed upon by God and believer. This disembodied, propositional definition of religion was the template that allowed European intellectuals to make sense of the ideas of colonized subjects. By reducing difference to sameness, by disembodiment subjects' ideas and practices, comparative religion functioned as a strategy of intellectual and political control.¹³²

The history of the concept of religion in India shows how problematic and ideological is religion as a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon. Smith finds no religion named "Hinduism" until 1829, and even the term "Hindu" was unknown in classical India.¹³³ Hindu was a Persian term used to refer to those on the far side of the Sindhu River. Muslim invaders used the term Hindu, but it referred to all non-Muslim natives of India, including those we presently divide into Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and animists.¹³⁴ In 1941, the British census gave up the attempt to number Hindus, because—although they were able to distinguish them from Muslims and Christians—they were unable to distinguish them from animists.

In precolonial India, there was no concept equivalent to religion. Mundane human activity was classified into things one does for enjoyment (*kāma*),

things one does as a means to an end (*artha*), and things one does out of duty (*dharma*). This last term has been used as the Indian equivalent of religion, but as Smith points out, dharma includes propriety, public law, temple ritual, caste obligations, and much more. Dharma does not include doctrine, such as the law of karma. Furthermore, dharma refers to mundane obligations and does not include the three ways of the *Trimārga*, which supplements mundane activity by offering paths to break away from bondage to the phenomenal world. Neither dharma nor any other term was used to indicate any peculiar institution analogous with a church: “Nor was there any term enabling an Indian to discriminate conceptually between the religious and the other aspects of his society’s life.”¹³⁵

The invention of Hinduism as a religion allowed for the differentiation of Hinduism from politics, economics, and other aspects of social life, and it also allowed for the distinction of Hinduism from other religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Such differentiation was not simply an improvement on the former system of classification, however, as if new terms suddenly allowed Indians to see what they had been missing before. To the contrary, the use of the term religion has produced confusion and misdescription of the phenomena of Indian life. As Timothy Fitzgerald points out, the separation of religion from society in India is misleading in a context in which caste hierarchy, exchange of goods, ritual, and political power are densely intertwined. Dharma—the favored term for religion—includes cosmic, social, and ritual order. Louis Dumont has written that, in India, “the politico-economic domain is encompassed in an overall religious setting.”¹³⁶ If this is true, Fitzgerald asks, does anything lie outside of religion? And if nothing lies outside of religion, is religion a useful term?

Similarly, differences among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, animists, and others are poorly served by the term religion. For some purposes, what Westerners consider to be other religions are included under the rubric of Hinduism. In its clause on freedom of religion, the Indian Constitution says that “reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion.”¹³⁷ The 1955 Hindu Marriage Act goes further, defining as Hindus all Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and anyone who is not a Christian, Muslim, Parsee, or Jew.¹³⁸ Where differences among these groups become important, it is often not purely “religious” differences that are informative. When determining the differences among the above groups, religious criteria such as beliefs about gods are usually inadequate; caste position, for example, is often far more determinative than beliefs. Muslims and Hindus in India worship at each other’s shrines. As Fitzgerald comments, “This suggests that it would be difficult to separate Hindus and

Muslims simply on the basis of different religions defined by relations with superhuman beings.”¹³⁹

The above problems and more have led Frits Staal to conclude, “Hinduism does not merely fail to be a religion; it is not even a meaningful unit of discourse.”¹⁴⁰ Other scholars acknowledge the problems, but continue to talk about a religion called Hinduism anyway. R. N. Dandekar writes, “Hinduism can hardly be called a religion in the properly understood sense of the term,” though that recognition does not stop him from treating Hinduism under the rubric of religion.¹⁴¹ Simon Weightman writes, “Hinduism displays few of the characteristics that are generally expected of a religion.”¹⁴² Weightman lists what Hinduism lacks: it has no founder, no prophets, no creed, no dogma, no system of theology, no single moral code, no uniquely authoritative scripture, no ecclesiastical organization, and the concept of a god is not centrally important. He adds, “It is then possible to find groups of Hindus whose respective faiths have almost nothing in common with one another, and it is also impossible to identify any universal belief or practice that is common to all Hindus.”¹⁴³ Weightman continues to identify Hinduism as a religion, however, because he says that Hindus themselves affirm that it is a single religion. There are several problems here. First, the definitions of “Hindus” and “Hinduism” are circular. Hindus believe in Hinduism, and Hinduism is what Hindus believe in. Second, there is no recognition of historical factors at work. There was a time when no one in India thought he or she had a religion named Hinduism. A change occurred only after more than a century of British rule. Might there be a connection? The fact that Weightman’s list of what is “generally expected of a religion” would only fully apply to Christianity should alert the reader that religion is originally a Western concept. If Indians now—after centuries of Western influence—find themselves with a religion called Hinduism, it is worth asking how that state of affairs came to pass.

When seen through the eyes of the British colonizers, the initial difficulty of fitting Hinduism into the category of religion was not due to a problem with the Western notion of religion. The problem lay in the irrational nature of Hinduism itself. Thus, James Mill in his influential *The British History of India* states:

Whenever indeed we seek to ascertain the definite and precise ideas of the Hindus in religion, the subject eludes our grasp. All is loose, vague, wavering, obscure, and inconsistent. Their expressions point at one time to one meaning, and another time to another meaning; and their wild fictions, to use the language of Mr. Hume, seem rather the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape than the

serious assertions of a being who dignifies himself with the name of the rational.¹⁴⁴

As S. N. Balagangadhara comments on this passage, “It did not occur to people then, as it does not seem to occur to people now, that this amorphous nature of Hinduism might have little to do with its ‘amazing capacities.’ It is more likely that the absence of structure has something to do with the fact that it is an imaginary entity.”¹⁴⁵ Though imaginary, Hinduism as a religion was a useful concept to the colonizers. According to Mill, the pervasiveness of religion throughout society and the failure to “properly” separate religion from politics and economics were evidence of the irrationality of the Hindu. James Mill—who, along with his son John Stuart Mill, was employed by the British East India Company—argued that the despotic divine kingship and the priestly tyranny of precolonial India were supplanted by more rational government under British rule.¹⁴⁶

Two different types of European discourse about Hinduism developed in the nineteenth century. Mill represents one type, which accused Hinduism of being coarsely ritualistic, obsessed with endless and meaningless external rites and ceremonies.¹⁴⁷ On this score, Hinduism was routinely compared with Catholicism by European Protestants.¹⁴⁸ The other type of discourse about Hinduism saw it as mystical and otherworldly. Given the pejorative implications that Catholic mysticism had for Protestants, Hindu mysticism could also be associated with irrational and obscurantist strains of religion. On the other hand, the mystical Orient held a certain allure for some kinds of Western thinking. Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel constructed a Hinduism whose direct, unmediated absorption of consciousness into the divine became the passionate Other to the West’s overly rational identity. For this type of Orientalism, the more apparently philosophically oriented Vedantic texts, especially the Upanishads, became the core of Hinduism.¹⁴⁹ The Upanishads lent themselves to this process because of the way that they allegorize sacrificial rituals into individual spiritual practices—for example, the fire sacrifice *agnihotra* is transformed from an external ritual to an interior yogic practice of controlling the life force (*prāna*) within.¹⁵⁰ What both the negative and positive views of Hinduism have in common is the idea that a proper religion should be essentially interior, a direct, ahistorical, and apolitical relation of the individual soul to a larger, superhuman, cosmic reality.

The Western concept of religion may have been inadequate to the reality of Indian culture, but it did provide certain advantages to the colonizers. The creation of a unified religion called Hinduism established something structurally parallel to Christianity so that Christian missionaries could compare and

contrast the Christian and Hindu creeds. Of course, in such a comparison, Hinduism was seen to be woefully deficient, except perhaps in the high culture of the Vedantic texts. As Richard King comments:

The lack of orthodoxy, of an ecclesiastical structure, or indeed of any distinctive feature that might point to the postulation of a single Hindu religion, was dismissed, and one consequence of this was the tendency to portray “Hinduism” as a contradictory religion, which required some form of organization along ecclesiastical and doctrinal lines and a purging of “superstitious” elements incompatible with the “high” culture of “Hinduism.”¹⁵¹

The nonrational nature of Hinduism provided a rationale not only for the imposition of order in religious matters but for the ordering of India as a whole. As Ronald Inden writes:

Implicit in this notion of Hinduism as exemplifying a mind that is imaginative and passionate rather than rational and willful was, of course, the idea that the Indian mind requires an externally imported world-ordering rationality. This was important for the imperial project of the British as it appeared, piecemeal, in the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁵²

Crucial to the imperial ordering of India were the binary distinctions between rational and nonrational, modern and ancient, public and private. The Western concept of religion served these distinctions well. As a “mystical” religion, Hinduism was both nonrational and timeless, locked in an ancient, ever-repeating cycle.¹⁵³ Hinduism furthermore belonged essentially to the private realm because, as a religion, it was based in personal experiences of the individual conscience.¹⁵⁴ The focus on Hindu mysticism helped to separate Hinduism from the essentially distinct realms of politics and economics. If Hinduism is a religion, then it is essentially removed from the ambit of worldly power. In reality, the amorphous nature of Hinduism is due to the fact that Hinduism originally included all that it means to be Indian, including what modern Westerners divided into religion, politics, economics, and so on. But if Hinduism is what it means to be Indian, then by identifying and isolating a religion called Hinduism, the British were able to marginalize what it means to be Indian. Under British colonization, to be British was to be public; to be Indian was to be private. The very conception of religion was a tool in removing native Indian culture and Indians themselves from the exercise of public power.

Colonial hegemony in this process should not be exaggerated; colonization was not simply a one-way street on which modernity was imposed on the passive Orient. In India, nineteenth-century Brahmins themselves had a key role in establishing a certain high-culture Brahmanism based on Sanskrit texts as the norm for all of Hinduism.¹⁵⁵ Colonized peoples also creatively used the tools of the colonizers to forge their own identities. Sanjay Joshi, for example, has shown that early twentieth-century middle-class activists resisted British attempts to confine Hindu religion to the realm of the personal and the private by emphasizing the Hindu roots of universal values like reason, progress, freedom, and community over tradition and superstitious rites. This “republicizing” of religion eventually led to the kinds of Hindu nationalism that helped to end British rule. In the process, however, Hinduism was constructed along the model of a Western religion; it was fundamentally a generator of values. Such values, detached from superstitious rites and the traditional past, were used by Jawaharlal Nehru and others to forge India into an officially secular nation-state on the Western model.¹⁵⁶ In other words, even resistance to colonization often works within the parameters set by the colonizers. For this reason, as Richard Cohen points out, contemporary advocates of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva)—especially the powerful BJP—reject the confinement of Hinduism to religion: “The proponents of Hindutva refuse to call Hinduism a religion precisely because they want to emphasize that Hinduism is more than mere internalized beliefs. It is social, political, economic, and familial in nature. Only thus can India the secular state become interchangeable with India the Hindu homeland.”¹⁵⁷

Another religion of Indian origin—“Buddhism”—appeared on the scene in the early decades of the nineteenth century. According to Philip Almond, Buddhism was “an imaginative creation” of Western scholars: “Buddhism, by 1860, had come to exist, not in the Orient, but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West, in its texts and manuscripts, at the desks of the Western savants who interpreted it.”¹⁵⁸ This does not mean, of course, that the phenomena of which Buddhism consists did not exist before the nineteenth century. The founding figure, his teachings, and the institutions dedicated to them are ancient. Until the nineteenth century, however, it was not clear that there was a separate religion called Buddhism. As Tomoko Masuzawa remarks, “Until that time, neither European observers nor, for the most part, native ‘practitioners’ of those various devotional, contemplative, divinatory, funereal, and other ordinary and extraordinary cults that are now roundly called Buddhist had thought of these divergent rites and widely scattered institutions as constituting a single religion.”¹⁵⁹ Many Western scholars identified Buddhist devotions as a “branch of the vast Hindu banyan tree,” paying

particular attention to the Brahminical identification of the Buddha as the ninth *avatāra* of the god Vishnu.¹⁶⁰

The invention of Buddhism as a distinct religion was based on the discovery of Sanskrit texts that could be used to trace the origins of disparate rites in Asia back to the figure of Gautama. Buddhism was born as a textual religion, on the model of Protestantism. Once this work was done, the actual living manifestations of these rites were understood by Western scholars as corruptions from the original spirit of the texts. The purity of the universal, interior, spiritual message of the Buddha had been debased into materialistic ritual. The Buddha was commonly presented—by Max Müller, among many others—as the “Martin Luther of the East,” a reformer who had rejected the ritualism of Hinduism to found a purely spiritual religion. Where Hinduism was a particularistic national religion, Buddhism was universal, originating in the mind of Gautama and capable of being practiced anywhere. The fact that Buddhism itself had been degraded in practice from the founder’s original insight did not prevent the designation of Buddhism as a world religion. It was, however, considered to be a world religion based on its original form, not on its actual corrupt forms as practiced in the Orient.¹⁶¹

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with the construction of Buddhism as a religion is that many Buddhist traditions explicitly deny belief in God or gods. This fact has caused much vexation among those who insist that Buddhism is a religion. Martin Southwold argues:

We have shown that practical Buddhism does not manifest a central concern with godlike beings. Hence *either* the theistic definitions and conception of religion are wrong *or* Buddhism is not a religion. But the latter proposition is not a viable option. In virtually every other aspect Buddhism markedly resembles religions, and especially the religion prototypical for our conception, i.e., Christianity. If we declare that Buddhism is not a religion, we take on the daunting task of explaining how a non-religion can come so uncannily to resemble religions.¹⁶²

The supposed fact that Buddhism “resembles religions” of course begs the question of how religions are defined. They are, presumably, things that look like Christianity, since Christianity is Southwold’s admitted prototype of religion. But Buddhism lacks a god, a concept quite central to Christianity. So Southwold—determined that Buddhism must be a religion—expands the definition of religion to include any phenomenon that has *at least one* from a list of twelve attributes, a list that includes “ritual practices,” “a mythology,” and “association with an ethnic or similar group.” Southwold goes on to say that

more attributes could be added to his list in order to include other things we consider to be religions.¹⁶³ We begin, in other words, with the conviction that Buddhism must be a religion, and then we adjust the definition to include it.

Why go to such great lengths to construct a religion made up of such heterogeneous and atheistic practices? Of what use is the classification of Buddhism as a religion? For Western missionaries and scholars, it served to establish a parallel with Christianity, so that comparison could take place. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, Donald Lopez has shown that both Catholics and Protestants were struck by the similarities of “lamaism” with Catholicism. Early Catholic missionaries to China and Tibet explained the similarities of rite and hierarchy by a process of demonic imitation of the Catholic original. Protestant scholars of Eastern religion from the mid-eighteenth century and into the twentieth century commonly saw in Tibetan Buddhism a prime example of the corruption of the spiritual purity of the original Indian Buddhism into materialistic ritualism, just as Catholicism was a degradation of the purity of the gospel. British experience in overthrowing Catholic tyranny would be helpful for the liberation of Tibet. As Lopez notes:

It is not simply analogy that Pali Buddhism (which by the end of the nineteenth century was largely under British control) is to Tibetan Buddhism (which at the end of the nineteenth century Britain was actively seeking to control) as Protestantism is to Roman Catholicism. It is rather a strategy of debasing the distant and unsubjugated by comparing it with the near and long subjugated, subjugated both by its relegation to England’s pre-Reformation past and to its present European rivals and Irish subjects.¹⁶⁴

British Buddhologist L. Austine Waddell wrote of the necessity of British help in recovering the pristine state of Buddhism in Tibet from the “intolerable tyranny of the Lamas.” According to Waddell, the mission of the British was “to herald the rise of a new star in the East, which may for long, perhaps for centuries, diffuse its mild radiance over this charming land and interesting people. In the University, which must ere long be established under British direction at Lhasa, a chief place will surely be assigned to studies in the origin of the religion of the country.”¹⁶⁵ As Lopez notes, Waddell wrote this in his account of the British invasion of Tibet in 1903–1904, in which he took part.¹⁶⁶

Buddhism as a world religion was not merely a European creation. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, monastic elites in Sri Lanka, China, and Japan began to posit a monolithic Buddhism as a world religion, fully equal with Christianity, with its own founder, scriptures, and established set of doctrines. This “Buddhist modernism,” as it has been called, presents

Buddhism as most compatible with modern notions of reason and science, since it does not hold beliefs in supernatural deities. Buddhism is presented as essentially nonviolent and highly interior. The key practice is individual meditation, and the host of other rites practiced at the popular level is frowned upon as superstition.¹⁶⁷ As Lopez points out, the most important present-day advocate of Buddhist modernism is the current Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has presented a Buddhism shorn of the trappings of Tibetan culture, consisting instead of universal, transcultural values such as compassion. At the same time, he has moved actively to suppress the centuries-old cult of the protective deity Shugden among Tibetans in exile, considering it a less rational and less universal corruption of pure Buddhism. For the Dalai Lama, the heart of Tibet is not its material culture but its religion. By universalizing and interiorizing Tibetan Buddhism as a religion, the Dalai Lama has offered a transcultural, beatific Buddhism easily digested by Western consumers. The Dalai Lama hopes to win sympathy for the plight of Tibet under Chinese rule and win Western support for Tibetan independence. The problem, as Lopez points out, is that Tibetan religion has been made to float free of Tibet, such that it is easy for Westerners to embrace Buddhism and forget about Tibet. The reassertion of the cult of Shugden among Tibetan exiles may be understood as an attempt to take back Buddhism from the West, to make it indigestible to Western appetites.¹⁶⁸

Buddhism has long been stereotyped by Western scholars as individualistic, rationalistic, interior, apolitical, and asocial. As Richard Cohen remarks, “Buddhism, thus stereotyped, is a religion that even Kant could love.”¹⁶⁹ Cohen has shown that Buddhist traditions have not always been so detachable from such mundane concerns as culture and politics. In his study of inscriptions and other evidence of the Ajanta community, beginning in the fifth century, Cohen finds that what we now call Buddhism was about negotiating kinship and trade relations, not simply beliefs and individual salvation: “For Ajanta’s Buddhists, religion was a matter of politics as much as liberation, as much a matter of instrumental power as of transcendent proof.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, Cohen finds the very term religion to be unhelpful, because it is commonly used to exclude material factors. He shows that the idealist assumptions that pervade scholarship on Buddhism—that Buddhism, as a religion, is about universal truth and the salvation of the individual soul—are not only a scholarly problem. Cohen shows that the same contemporary Hindu nationalists that refuse to call Hinduism a religion denigrate Buddhism as a purely religious phenomenon with no contribution to make to social and political reality in India.¹⁷¹

The creation of Shinto in Japan is one of the most fascinating examples of how—and for what purposes—the category of religion has been introduced

into non-Western contexts. The term “Shinto”—which refers to worship of the kami, gods associated with natural forces such as the sun—has been known since the eighth century. Until the nineteenth century, however, worship of the kami was interwoven with rites associated with the Buddha and buddhas. Shinto and Buddhism were not two separate traditions. In the face of the forced opening of Japan to Western trade and influence in the mid-nineteenth century, however, a nativist movement clamored for the creation of a distinctly Japanese cult. The Meiji state after 1868 undertook a nationwide “separation of kami and buddhas” (*shinbutsu bunri*). The Meiji government took control of the shrines thus “purified” of Buddhism and declared that “shrines of the kami are for the worship of the state.”¹⁷²

By the mid-1870s, however, the Meiji government was under pressure both from Western powers and from educated Japanese elites who had studied in the West, such as Mori Arinori, later to be minister of education. In 1872, Arinori wrote a treatise in English declaring that the government’s “attempt to impose upon our people a religion of its creation cannot receive too severe condemnation.”¹⁷³ In 1875, the government officially declared freedom of religion, provided that religion did not impede the acceptance of imperial proclamations. This qualification led to an official distinction between Shinto performed at government-sponsored shrines (shrine Shinto) and that performed elsewhere (sect Shinto). Sect Shinto was conceived of as a doctrine and was therefore defined as religion (*shūkyō*, a technical term borrowed from Buddhist monastic practice meaning “group teaching” or “sect teaching”). Shrine Shinto was dedicated to the worship of the state and was not considered religion but “rites” (*jinja*). Belief in religious teachings was therefore a private matter of choice, but the performance of rituals for the state was a public duty. From the 1880s to World War II, official state rhetoric made a sharp distinction between Shinto and religion. Buddhism, Christianity, and other sects were religions, symptoms of selfishness and disunity. There was a movement, therefore, to classify all shrines of the kami as national shrines, to avoid the taint of religion.¹⁷⁴

The officially endorsed national cult of Shinto had gained such power in the early twentieth century that the victorious U.S. government moved immediately to remove shrine Shinto from public power at the end of World War II. Sarah Thal explains:

At that time all government support of Shinto shrines, teachings, rituals, and institutions was expressly forbidden in order “to separate religion from the state, to prevent misuse of religion for political ends, and to put all religions, faiths, and creeds upon exactly the

same legal basis.” After years of denying the religiosity of Shinto, priests and apologists found themselves suddenly defined as religious, limited by the very principle of freedom of religious belief which they had once overcome by defining themselves against religion.¹⁷⁵

Shinto is often identified as a religion in Western surveys of world religions. The fact that many of the prominent practitioners of Shinto explicitly have denied its status as a religion indicates how problematic the category of religion is when applied to Japan. Although Shinto and Buddhism are considered two separate religions by Western writers, Kuroda Toshio calls this idea “misleading at best” not only historically but for contemporary Japanese society as well.¹⁷⁶ Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so-called new religions participate in one ideological and cultural complex in Japan. Western distinctions between religion and politics, or religion and culture, fit awkwardly, if at all, in the modern Japanese context. Extricating religion from politics in such an explicitly nationalistic set of practices as Shinto is highly misleading. As Timothy Fitzgerald points out, the rituals performed in modern factories, shrines dedicated to the various kami, schools, temples, corporate headquarters, or shrines for the war dead have the same basic structure and function, which is to ensure propriety and the propitious functioning of Japanese society. Indeed, ritual actions are increasing in modern Japanese society despite the fact that fewer and fewer Japanese actually believe in gods and their ability to bring benefits. According to Fitzgerald, this fact, so strange to Western eyes, is accounted for by the fact that rites are not about belief but about social order. Religious fulfillment of obligations is not distinguishable from social fulfillment of obligations. Fitzgerald suggests dropping the word religion for the Japanese context and using “ritual” instead.¹⁷⁷ Peter Beyer writes, “Japanese people engage in a wide range of activities that might analytically be included as ‘religious,’ but which they do not usually recognize as ‘religion,’” and Beyer suggests a more appropriate term than religion would be “culture.”¹⁷⁸

The case of China is similar to that of Japan in that modernizing elites in the late nineteenth century adopted the term religion (*zongjiao*, the corresponding Chinese word to the Japanese *shūkyō*, group or sect teaching) but refused to identify those traditions most closely identified with the national character as religion. The man most responsible for introducing the term religion to China, Liang Chichao, declared in the early twentieth century that “there is no religion among the indigenous products of China.” He later made an exception to this rule for the case of Daoism, but said that this is a “humiliation” for China, because Daoism resembles such foreign products as

Buddhism and Christianity. According to Beyer, Chinese elites such as Liang Chichao rejected religion for two reasons: it was highly individualistic, and therefore inimical to national unity, and it was nonprogressive, and therefore inimical to the modernization of China. Chinese elites therefore championed “Confucianism” as indigenous, unitive, and progressive, but also as definitely *not* religious.¹⁷⁹

That Confucianism would become one of the world religions in Western taxonomies is therefore a very curious phenomenon. A loose tradition of scholarly ethical precepts, lacking gods and transcendence, Confucianism is closer to what Westerners consider “philosophy.” Besides having no indigenous term for religion in Chinese, there was also no word for Confucianism, Buddhism, or Daoism. Westerners consider these three to be religions, but as Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out, a single Chinese can be a Confucianist, a Buddhist, and a Daoist at the same time: “To ask a census-taker how many Chinese are Buddhist is rather like asking one how many Westerners are Aristotelian or pragmatist.”¹⁸⁰ Since Smith wrote in 1962, however, the communist government in China has become very precise in its definition of religion, such that now the census taker might have more success in finding Buddhists. In the official 1982 document that governs religious practice in China, known as Document 19, religion is defined as an organized activity based on beliefs in supernatural beings. According to Document 19, there are five religions in China—Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and Daoism—and no others. Confucianism, Maoism, and such expressions of the national character are excluded from this list as they are superior to mere religion, which is essentially otherworldly. Also excluded from this list are “superstitious” practices such as phrenology and witchcraft, as well as new movements deemed to be “injurious to the national welfare.” The official definition of religion and the list of five religions is clearly intended to establish a space for “freedom of religion,” which is circumscribed and essentially nonpublic, and to proscribe new groups, such as Falun Gong, which might challenge the control of the Communist Party over public life.¹⁸¹

This brief digest of recent scholarship is not intended, of course, to be a comprehensive survey of the career of the concept of religion in non-Western contexts. It should be sufficient, however, to demonstrate the two points mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The first is that religion is not a transcultural reality. Masuzawa puts this conclusion bluntly: “This concept of religion as a general, transcultural phenomenon, yet also as a distinct sphere in its own right... is patently groundless; it came from nowhere, and there is no credible way of demonstrating its factual and empirical substantiality.”¹⁸² Those who go looking to spy religion in all places and times—as if it were a

reality that is simply there before anyone develops a concept of it—are guaranteed to produce confusion or worse. Religion is originally a Western concept, and it only becomes a worldwide concept through—and in reaction to—Western influence.

This does not mean that non-Western agents were not active in the production of the category religion. The West has never been a monolithic reality, and what defines the West has always been contested both from within and without. The West, however, is a modernizing *ideal*, a project pushed forward by certain interests both within and without countries identified as Oriental. The production of religion took place in a context established by pressures, both external and internal, to modernize and Westernize. As Charles Keyes sums up the process in Asia:

In pursuit of “progress” free from primordial attachments the rulers of [the] modern state[s] of East and South East Asia all have instituted policies toward religious institutions. These policies have been predicated on the adoption of official definitions of “religion,” definitions that (again) have tended to be derived from the West. Indeed, in most Asian cultures prior to the modern period, there was no indigenous terminology corresponding to ideas of “religion” held by Christians or Jews. Complex predispositions about the nature of religion—the primacy of texts; creeds pledging exclusive allegiance to a single deity; ethics; and a personal, privatized relation to a deity, all originating in the theologically unadorned varieties of Protestantism—were brought to Asia by missionaries in the nineteenth century. When these predispositions came to inform official discourse on religion, they were often used to devalue other aspects of religious life such as festivals, ritual and communal observances—precisely those aspects that were at the heart of popular religious life in East and South East Asia.¹⁸³

While Keyes retains the language of “popular religious life” in Asia, Daniel Dubuisson would jettison all such language as fundamentally misleading. Religion was and remains, according to Dubuisson, a fundamentally Western concept. Indeed, Dubuisson calls religion “the West’s most characteristic concept, around which it has established and developed its identity.”¹⁸⁴ It characterizes the West because it establishes a fundamental divide between religion and nonreligion that has determined the Western view of reality and the Western organization of the world. In the West, religion is a distinct domain, separated from the rest of life. This division is found nowhere that has not been influenced by the West, but this has not prevented the West from declaring the

concept to be universal. Insofar as other religions deviate from the (Western) norm, then, they may be classified as primitive, strange, unreasonable. In other words, presenting the Western concept of religion as universal declares the Western subject to be universal and the non-Western Others, therefore, as parochial. We should avoid this imposition, according to Dubuisson: “We should also avoid describing as universal values that the West alone has invented. Since their domain is always fundamentally one of conflict, these values would effectively become universal only when all the others had been destroyed and eliminated—by us.”¹⁸⁵

The force of this statement by Dubuisson compels us to the second crucial point to be concluded from this survey of religion in non-Western cultures: the transcultural concept of religion has been adopted because it is useful for certain purposes. In other words, religion is not a neutral scientific tool but is applied under circumstances in which configurations of power are relevant. As we have seen, this is most obviously the case in circumstances of direct colonial control, as in Africa and India, but it applies more generally to the “opening” of Asia to the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In general terms, knowledge of non-Western Others allowed for a certain measure of control of other peoples, especially since the knowledge was contained within the West’s own system of classification, the West’s own way of identifying what is religion and what is not. Huston Smith, one of the great twentieth-century figures in the study of world religions, once made this point with alarming candor:

The motives that impel us toward world understanding may be several. Recently I was taxied by bomber to the Air Command and Staff College at the Maxwell Air Force Base outside Montgomery, Alabama, to lecture to a thousand selected officers on the religions of other peoples. I have never had students more eager to learn. What was their motivation? Individually I am sure it went beyond this in many cases, but as a unit they were concerned because someday they were likely to be dealing with the peoples they were studying as allies, antagonists, or subjects of military occupation. Under such circumstances it would be crucial for them to predict their behavior, conquer them if worse came to worst, and control them during the aftermath or reconstruction. This is one reason for coming to know people. It may be a necessary reason; certainly we have no right to disdain it as long as we ask the military to do the job we set before it.¹⁸⁶

In more specific terms, the discourse of religion has been used to provide a tool of comparison by which non-Western practices could be shown to be

deficient when compared with Christianity and Western culture more generally. Perhaps most important, the discourse of religion was also a tool of secularization, the cordoning off of significant elements of non-Western cultures into a personal, apolitical realm of belief. The irony here is that, as Russell McCutcheon says, the very conception of religion as self-caused, as directly related to individual consciousness and not directly related to material factors, and therefore utterly distinct from issues of power, is itself an instrument of colonial and neocolonial strategies of power.¹⁸⁷ The idea that there is a trans-cultural phenomenon called religion that has a dangerous tendency toward violence—and must therefore be domesticated—is not only a misdescription of reality. The idea itself should be interrogated for the kinds of power that it authorizes. The attempt to domesticate certain practices as religion, both at home and abroad, is not innocent of political use.

Defining Religion

If we concede that religion is a product of modernity and of the West, is religion at least a coherent concept in the modern West? Now that the category has been constructed in the West and in cultures affected by the West, can we use it as an objective tool of analysis to distinguish the religious from the secular and to make statements such as “religion is more prone to violence today than are secular ideologies and institutions”? In this section, I will show that, even within the modern West, religion remains a widely contested notion, and I will argue that the ability to define what counts as religion and what does not is a significant part of how public power is arranged in the West and in the rest of the world.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was perhaps the first to recommend that the term religion be dropped entirely, concluding that the term is “confusing, unnecessary, and distorting.”¹⁸⁸ Smith argues that the noun religion is an unhelpful reification of what does not as such exist. However, he still contends that it is possible to be religious without the concept of religion, and that the adjectival form religious escapes the danger of reification, because it refers to a personal quality of faith that is a constant in human hearts across space and time. This personal quality exists, but it is not a “thing.” Faith is an inner state of heart and mind. Furthermore, faith is both transhistorical and transcultural. So Smith still wants to say, “Man is everywhere and has always been what we today call ‘religious.’”¹⁸⁹

Although the implications of Smith’s historical work strongly hint that essentialist accounts of religion should be left behind, Smith himself is unable

finally to escape essentialism. Faith for Smith is a universal inner state that only subsequently takes outward forms. Faith, however, can only be rightly understood as inextricable from outward practices located in history. Smith criticizes Aquinas for carelessness when he associates *religio* with both inner motivations and outward expressions. But for Aquinas, as we have seen, inward and outward are not two essentially different things; *religio*, as a virtue, entails the inculcating of habits through bodily disciplines, which are embedded in changing historical circumstances. For Smith, these outward forms are the mere husk surrounding the kernel of faith. As Talal Asad points out, Smith's conception of faith makes the difference between a person of faith and one who has no faith unobservable. It also happens to fit perfectly into the Western, liberal separation of private religiosity from the public realm. Despite Smith's own careful historical work, his individualized and otherworldly conception of "religious faith" floats free of concrete historical conditions and therefore diverts us from asking questions about how the religious is defined, by whom, and for what purpose.¹⁹⁰

Although Smith may never have asked these questions, his work inspired new generations of scholars who do. Such scholars have critiqued substantivist definitions of religion, such as those used, explicitly and implicitly, by the scholars we examined in the first chapter (with the exception of Richard Wentz). The problem with those theories of religion and violence, as we have seen, is not that their definitions of religion are too fuzzy around the edges. The problem is that they are *unjustifiably clear* about what counts as religion and what does not: things like Christianity and Buddhism and Shinto are self-evidently religions, and things like nationalism and Marxism are secular phenomena. By showing how the concept of religion is historically and culturally relative, Wilfred Cantwell Smith opened the door to new ways of investigating religion. Rather than treat religions as self-evident entities with clear boundaries, scholars have begun to show that what does and does not count as religion is itself worthy of investigation.

Substantivist Approaches

Substantivist definitions of religion attempt to separate what Western scholars since the nineteenth century have identified as the world religions from other phenomena based on their beliefs about the nature of reality. Belief in God or gods is the usual starting place, but as a single criterion it is regarded as too restrictive, because it would exclude some belief systems that generally make lists of world religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. The category of the transcendent is sometimes offered in place of God or gods,

in such a way that Buddhist talk of nirvana would qualify. Transcendence is meant to be an inclusive concept that would cover both gods and other phenomena, but its inclusiveness depends on how it is defined. Many scholars, for example, deny that Confucianism has any concept of transcendence;¹⁹¹ Jan Bremmer writes that “the gods of the Greeks were not transcendent but directly involved in natural and social processes.”¹⁹² On the other hand, insofar as transcendence is defined inclusively, its inclusivity is difficult to control. In other words, once the definition of religion is expanded to include all the things that such scholars want to include, it becomes difficult to exclude all the things that they want to exclude. Once the transcendent becomes the focus of one’s definition of religion, there is no reason to suppose that the generally recognized world religions would exhaust the category. As Timothy Fitzgerald points out, transcendent notions can include “the ‘Nation,’ the land, the principles of humanism, the ancestors, Communism, *ātman-brahman*, the goddess of democracy and human rights, Cold Speech, Enlightenment (in various quite different senses), the right to private property, witchcraft, destiny, the ‘Immaculate Conception,’ ”¹⁹³ and so on.

The problem with transcendence is that, in order to be inclusive enough to embrace both Judaism and Buddhism, it must be vague. It can be given a more specific meaning by attending carefully to the contexts and ways in which it is used. But the more specific the context and usage, the more unhelpful it becomes to lump them all under the same heading. Since the study of world religions was initiated by Western Christian scholars in the nineteenth century, the meaning of terms like transcendence is almost inevitably modeled on Judeo-Christian theological definitions of transcendence based on the relationship of a Creator God to the created world. When there is no Creator God, as in Buddhism, it is difficult to see how the term transcendence can be fitted into Buddhism without doing violence to Buddhists’ own self-understanding. This is not to say that the same term can never be used in describing two different traditions. It is to say that the usefulness of such terms can only be determined by highly specific analyses of particular contexts. It should not be imposed as part of a definition that determines from the start that Buddhism and Christianity are two varieties of the same thing. Transcendence can be used in the Buddhist context only by trying to ignore the Judeo-Christian theological background of the term and making it more vague and more general. In this case, the specificity that the term once had is lost, as is any reason to assume that nationalism, for example, does not belong in the same category as Judaism and Buddhism. If transcendence can refer to any perceived reality that exceeds and unifies ordinary human experience of the material world, it is hard to imagine a better candidate for transcendence than the “imagined

community” of the nation. The much-used term civil religion recognizes this reality. The problem for scholars who employ substantivist definitions of religion is that they do not want to include nationalism in the definition of religion. Why not? Because it is said to be a *secular* phenomenon. But policing the boundary between the religious and the secular depends on a definition of religion that locates the religious-secular divide in just the right place. Basing a definition of religion on the concept of transcendence does not appear very promising in this regard.

Similar problems result with other definitions that attempt to separate religion from the secular by reference to a two-tiered view of reality: empirical-supraempirical, natural-supernatural, or human-superhuman. Such a two-tiered view of reality has a specific history within the West and cannot be imposed unproblematically on all cultures, many of which do not divide the world in the same way. The anthropologist Brian Morris defines religion as all phenomena seen to be supraempirical, but as Fitzgerald points out, *all* values are supraempirical, including such secular values as freedom and the rights of man.¹⁹⁴ The natural-supernatural divide also fails to provide the basis of a transhistorical and transcultural definition of religion, because such a divide is not self-evident. In some non-Western cultures, it is not at all clear if what Westerners call the supernatural is ontologically distinct from nature or if it is a part of nature, and some may not even have an indigenous concept of nature to begin with. Do animists, for example, divide the world into nature and supernature? Even in the premodern West, as Nicholas Lash points out, there was no concept of nature and supernature as two ontologically distinct realms. Until the seventeenth century, supernatural was used adverbially or adjectivally to indicate someone acting above what is ordinarily expected of them, for example, a human being acting justly and truthfully through the gifts of God’s grace. The term supernatural, therefore, could never be applied to God.¹⁹⁵ Definitions of religion in terms of perceived interactions with superhuman beings do not necessarily rely on a nature-supernature split, and thus leave open the possibility that superhuman beings are still part of nature, despite being more powerful than humans. This definition, however, still leaves the problem of determining who or what is considered superhuman in any given culture. Are bodhisattvas superhuman? Ancestors? Emperors? Space aliens? Saints? Sacred animals? Celebrities? As Balagangadhara points out, the category superhuman implies a hierarchy of God → humans → animals, in descending order, a hierarchy that is firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but absent from Indian culture, where cows are worshipped as sacred. The further problem is that the division of interactions between those with beings who are superhuman and with those who are not does not necessarily tell us anything interesting

and may in fact obscure rather than illuminate certain phenomena. For example, Fitzgerald says that rituals to propitiate angry ghosts in Japan cannot be understood without reference to values such as hierarchy, deference, purity, and Japaneseness. But these values are reproduced in all major Japanese institutions; rituals directed toward the emperor, bosses of corporations, foreigners, and monkeys are just as important for understanding these values as are rituals directed at ghosts or kami. Nothing is gained by separating these into one list—labeled religion—that includes superhuman beings and another list containing the rest. In fact, much is lost by this arbitrary division. It becomes difficult, for example, to explain why people who claim not to believe in superhuman beings continue to perform rituals directed at them.¹⁹⁶

The problem with substantivist definitions of religion, therefore, is twofold. First, defining religion in terms of the transcendent or the sacred or the supernatural or the supraempirical or any such terms just begs the question as to what those terms mean. If they are made vague enough to be transcultural, then they become so inclusive as to shatter the exclusivity of the category religion. Excluding systems of beliefs and practices from the list of world religions becomes arbitrary. There is no good reason for excluding all of the things that substantivists would like to exclude from the category of religion. Second, and more decisively for our purposes, even if one were able to come up with a coherent, transhistorical, and transcultural way to separate religion from the secular, there is no good reason to suppose that the distinction tells us anything important or interesting about the phenomena thus categorized. As William Arnal says, there might be a logical way of dividing the world's phenomena into things that are blue and things that are not blue, but it would not justify coming up with general theories of the nature of blueness or having Departments of Blue Studies in universities.¹⁹⁷ Even if one were able to come up with a coherent, transhistorical, and transcultural definition of religion which would include things like Christianity and Confucianism and Buddhism and exclude things like Marxism and nationalism and capitalism, it would not tell us anything worthwhile about the causes of violence. Indeed, to exclude Marxism, nationalism, and capitalism a priori from an investigation of violence in the service of ideology in fact *distorts* the results of any such study.

Functionalist Approaches

For these reasons, many scholars prefer functionalist definitions of religion, which tend to be more inclusive. Functionalist definitions are based not on the content or substance of a belief system but on the way that such a system functions, that is, the social, psychological, and political tasks that it performs in a

given context: “Functionalists prefer to define ‘religion’ not in terms of *what* is believed by the religious but in terms of *how* they believe it (that is in terms of the role belief plays in people’s lives). Certain individual or social needs are specified and religion is identified as any system whose beliefs, practices or symbols serve to meet those needs.”¹⁹⁸ To repeat the example I used in chapter 1, if a nonpracticing Christian claims to believe in God, but structures his life around the pursuit of profits in the bond market and the ideological defense of the free market, then the colloquial idea that “capitalism is his religion” needs to be taken seriously. In effect, functionalist approaches are a return to the broadest meaning of the word *religio* in classical Rome: any binding obligation or devotion that structures one’s social relations.

Émile Durkheim may be considered the pioneer of modern functionalist approaches to religion. According to Durkheim, “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions.”¹⁹⁹ Durkheim’s definition of religion thus depends on the distinction of sacred and profane. But Durkheim does not define sacred and profane based on their content. For Durkheim, *anything* can be considered sacred by a given society.²⁰⁰ What matters is not content but function, how a thing works within a given society. In any society, according to Durkheim, certain things are set aside as sacred as a symbolization of communal solidarity among the members of a society. The sacred is a representation of the whole society to itself. The content of the symbol is arbitrary; what matters is the way it functions to reinforce social order. For Durkheim, it does not matter that the U.S. flag does not explicitly refer to a god. It is nevertheless a sacred—perhaps the *most* sacred—object in U.S. society and is thus an object of religious veneration.²⁰¹

Functionalist approaches have the advantage of being based on empirical observation of people’s actual behavior, and not simply on claims of what they believe in the confines of some interior and unobservable mental state. They are also less inclined to bother about restricting religion to some exclusive and arbitrary set of world religions. The disadvantage of functionalist approaches is that they expand the category of religion so broadly that the category tends to lose meaning. If nearly every ideological system or set of practices can be a religion, then calling something religious does not help to distinguish it from anything else. The danger, as we saw in chapter 1, is that we will end up with Richard Wentz, saying something like “perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of religion.” Wentz has rightly seen how arbitrary substantivist definitions of religion are, but he has wrongly concluded that a greatly expanded category of religion will tell us something useful about violence.

According to Fitzgerald, the following can be found treated under the rubric of religion in the published works of religious studies scholars: totems, the principle of hierarchy, Christmas cakes, witchcraft, unconditioned reality, the rights of man, the national essence, Marxism, Freudianism, the tea ceremony, nature, and ethics.²⁰² Cole Durham and Elizabeth Sewell cite examples of sports, free market ideology, mathematics, belief in the possibility of cold fusion, radical psychotherapy, the use of health food, and nothingness itself being discussed under the category religion in scholarly literature.²⁰³ One could easily add to these lists. A U.S. District Court judge, Charles Briant, in 2001 ruled that Alcoholics Anonymous is a religion.²⁰⁴ Many atheistic humanists refer to themselves as “religious humanists”; Herbert Schneider sees the humanist religion as “an effort to free religious faith and devotion from the dogmas of theistic theologies and supernaturalist psychologies.”²⁰⁵ Paul Carus, the founder of Open Court publishing house, promulgated a “religion of science.”²⁰⁶ Theologian Dorothee Sölle laments, “The new religion is consumerism.”²⁰⁷ Sölle’s observation is confirmed by the research conducted by Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John Sherry, who find that consumer behavior exhibits the properties of sacralization identified by Durkheim and Mircea Eliade.²⁰⁸

We might be inclined to dismiss these uses of the term religion as merely metaphorical, as if what these authors really mean is that these ideas and practices behave an awful lot like real religions, which they really are not. But this is not in fact what functionalists contend. Functionalists maintain that the only coherent way to study religion is to include everything that acts like a religion under the rubric religion, whether or not past Western taxonomies of world religions have included them. Only by refusing to make arbitrary, a priori exclusions from the category of religion can we understand what religion is and how it functions in any given society.

David Loy’s “The Religion of the Market” is a good example of this approach. Loy writes:

Religion is notoriously difficult to define. If, however, we adopt a functionalist view and understand religion as what grounds us by teaching us what the world *is*, and what our *role* in the world is, then it becomes obvious that traditional religions are fulfilling this role less and less, because that function is being supplanted—or overwhelmed—by other belief-systems and value-systems. Today the most powerful alternative explanation of the world is science, and the most attractive value-system has become consumerism. Their academic offspring is economics, probably the most influential of the

“social sciences.” In response, this paper will argue that our present economic system should also be understood as our religion, because it has come to fulfill a religious function for us.²⁰⁹

According to Loy, economics is the theology of the religion that has the market as its god: “The collapse of communism—best understood as a capitalist ‘heresy’—makes it more apparent that the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious view we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as ‘secular.’”²¹⁰ Why do we insist on seeing them as secular? Because, Loy argues, to do so allows the regnant economic system to be seen as natural and inevitable. To enter the world of the secular is to enter the world of “facts” and to leave the religious world of “values” behind. What is gained by seeing market economics as our religion, therefore, is that we can see market economics as one particular, contingent way of seeing the world, not as an inevitable arrangement subject to the ironclad laws of nature.²¹¹ Our refusal to see market ideology as a religion is itself an important part of the success of market ideology as a religion. The more convinced we are that our economic system is not religious but secular, the more our devotion to the market eludes critical scrutiny and appears as inescapable.

Loy stands in a long line of thinkers who have seen market economics in religious terms. Karl Marx quoted Shakespeare addressing money as “Thou *visible God!*” For Marx, “the divine power of money” lay in its ability to reduce all things to an abstract equivalence in its own image and likeness.²¹² Marx thought it was not a coincidence that money was first minted in ancient temples, and he called money “the god among commodities.”²¹³ Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) recognized that money possessed “a significant relation to the notion of God” and referred to money as a surrogate for sacrament.²¹⁴ Norman O. Brown declared in his psychoanalysis of history (*Life against Death*, 1959) that the “money complex” is the “heir to and substitute for the religious complex, an attempt to find God in things.”²¹⁵ Many more examples from the twentieth century could be cited.²¹⁶ While these figures saw the religion of capitalism as a mystification of more basic economic processes, others have seen the religious qualities of market economics in a positive light. Robert H. Nelson’s 2001 book, *Economics as Religion*, for example, argues that, on the whole, the replacement of Christianity and other religions by the religion of economics has ushered in an age of freedom and prosperity. Nelson shows how market economics exactly parallels the earlier role of Christianity in Western society, with its own providential god (the invisible hand of the market), sacred texts, priesthood, and plan of salvation for the

recurrent problems of human history: “The Jewish and Christian bibles foretell one outcome of history. If economics foresees another, it is in effect offering a competing religious vision.”²¹⁷

Nelson sometimes refers to market economics as a secular religion. If this is not simply nonsense—like “square circle”—then it must mean one of two things: either (1) economics is one of those things usually considered secular, but it is really a religion, or (2) economics behaves like a religion, but it is really secular. If by calling economics a secular religion one understands (1), then “secular religion” is simply a nod toward the way the term secular is usually—but *mistakenly*—ascribed to economics. If one uses secular religion to mean (2), on the other hand, we must wonder what purpose the religion-secular divide serves here. Why would Nelson spend an entire book trying to convince the reader that economics behaves just like a religion, only to say that it really isn’t a religion? Even if we could come up with a way, based on content of beliefs, to separate market economics from religion—e.g., religions believe in real gods, but the invisible hand is just a metaphor—it would not tell us anything relevant about the way market economics actually functions in the real world. A functionalist would say, “If it looks like a religion and acts like a religion, then it is a religion.” Hence the title of Nelson’s book: *Economics as Religion*.

In the wake of rolling blackouts in 2001, one of the architects of California’s deregulation plan for utilities was quoted in the *New York Times* expressing his belief that competition always works better than state control. “I believe in that premise as a matter of religious faith,” said Philip J. Romero, dean of the University of Oregon business school.²¹⁸ Why not take him at his word? If free market economics functions in this case as an overarching framework of belief that explains human behavior and the direction of history, nothing is gained by insisting that Professor Romero is merely speaking metaphorically. What is lost is a potentially fruitful line of inquiry into the actual functioning of economic ideas and ideologies in the real world. A functionalist need not declare that economics functions as a religion in all cases for everyone. The functionalist has the advantage, rather, of letting empirical investigation guide the determination of what functions as a religion under which circumstances, rather than ruling out entire systems of behavior and belief a priori.

Nelson’s *Economics as Religion* has its counterpart in Emilio Gentile’s *Politics as Religion*. The Italian political scientist says that a “religion of politics” is religious insofar as it is “a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity.”²¹⁹ A religion of politics is not the same as a theocracy, which subordinates the state

to what Gentile calls a “traditional religion.” Gentile seems to use “traditional religion” loosely to mean things that are usually called religions in Western taxonomies: Christianity, Hinduism, etc. A religion of politics, on the other hand, is a secular religion because it creates “an aura of sacredness around an entity belonging to this world.”²²⁰ For Gentile, the pairing “this world/other world” seems to define the divide between secular and traditional religions. As in Durkheim, however, that divide does not make much difference; religions of politics are not just religionlike but are really religions. Whether the supreme entity to which all is subordinated is a god or a nation-state does not help to predict how a system of beliefs will function in society.²²¹

Gentile distinguishes between two different types of religion of politics. The first type, “political religion,” applies primarily to totalitarian regimes. Gentile defines political religion as “the sacralization of a political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments.” The second type of religion of politics is “civil religion,” which applies primarily to democratic regimes: “Civil religion is the conceptual category that contains the forms of sacralization of a political system that guarantee a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their governments through peaceful and constitutional methods.”²²² Gentile warns that the distinction between the two types is not always a sharp one; governing regimes may be located in a position between the two types when, for example, a democratic civil religion becomes intolerant of dissent and invasive regarding citizens’ rights.

The term political religion, of course, is not Gentile’s creation. Indeed, most of Gentile’s book consists of quoting author after author who has used the relevant terms as Gentile does. The term political religion is commonly traced to Erich Vogelin’s *Die politischen Religionen*, published in Vienna just before the Anschluss,²²³ but Gentile has found that Condorcet, Abraham Lincoln, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Polanyi all used the term before Vogelin. Since Vogelin, there has developed an extensive scholarly literature on the subject and an English-language journal, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, dedicated to its study. Most authors who use the term political religion see religion as a basic element of any social order. For many, the rise of political religion in the West is explained as a response to the decline of Christianity as the glue that held the premodern social order together.²²⁴

The chief examples of political religion in the West are Marxism/communism and fascism. Marxism has been recognized as a religion since Marx’s own time. The Young Hegelian Max Stirner attacked Marx’s

communism as just another variation on the religious theme, “only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion.” According to Stirner, communism “exalts ‘Man’ to the same extent as any other religion does its God or idol.”²²⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, on whose critique of God Marx drew, would not have disagreed. Feuerbach had written in 1842, “We must start to be religious once again; politics must become our religion, but it can only do so if we, in our perceptions, have a supreme value that makes our religion of politics.”²²⁶ Marx, however, wanted science, not religion. He responded to Stirner by insisting that communism was not an ideology of any kind, but an expression of the real and material movement of history, known through the objective science of history. Many twentieth-century critics, however, would side with Stirner and see Marxism as a type of religion. The ex-communist contributors to *The God That Failed* all describe their experience with the party in religious terms: a vision for the destiny of all humanity, unwavering faith in authoritatively promulgated doctrine, communal solidarity and ritual, and so on. Arthur Koestler’s contribution is typical in its recognition that “there is little difference between a revolutionary and a traditionalist faith.”²²⁷ The first chapter of Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, entitled “Marx as Prophet,” begins this way:

It was not by a slip that an analogy from the world of religion was permitted to intrude into the title of this chapter. There is more than analogy. In one important sense, Marxism *is* a religion. To the believer it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions; and, secondly, a guide to those ends which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved. We may specify still further: Marxist socialism also belongs to that subgroup which promises paradise on this side of the grave.²²⁸

A. J. P. Taylor, in his 1967 introduction to the *Communist Manifesto*, wrote that communism was “the accepted creed or religion for countless millions of mankind” and that the *Communist Manifesto* should be “counted as a holy book, in the same class as the Bible or the Koran.”²²⁹ Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, author of the massive and influential *Main Currents of Marxism*, also regarded Marxism as a religion, especially in its eschatology.²³⁰ The idea of Marxism as religion is not confined to its critics. Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrote that Marxism “is precisely the religion that has to kill off Christianity. It is a religion in the sense that it is also a faith with its own mysteries and practices, and because in our consciences it has replaced the transcendental

God of Catholicism with faith in Man and his best energies as the only spiritual reality.”²³¹

The other prominent examples of political religions are Italian fascism and German Nazism. As early as 1912, Benito Mussolini was calling for “a *religious* concept of socialism.”²³² It became commonplace among critics of the Mussolini and Hitler regimes, and among political scientists, to note the intensely ritualistic and all-absorbing nature of ideology in those regimes and to call it religion. Examples are so common that I need not belabor the point here.²³³

Of course, not everyone agrees that political systems may qualify as religions. For example, Ninian Smart recognizes that Marxism provides doctrines to explain “the whole of reality,” has a plan for realizing “heaven on earth,” has a well-developed public ceremonial aspect, and so on.²³⁴ Nevertheless, Smart contends, “it is unrealistic to treat Marxism as a religion: though it possesses doctrines, symbols, a moral code, and even sometimes rituals, it denies the possibility of an experience of the invisible world. Neither relationship to a personal God nor the hope of an experience of salvation or nirvana can be significant for the Marxist.”²³⁵ What appears to define religion for Smart here is “an experience of the invisible world.” There are several problems with this account, beginning with the attempt to determine what counts as the invisible world. If the divide is made on the basis of belief in an invisible world, it is not clear that, for example, Buddhism and Marxism will end up where Smart wants them. Nirvana for a Buddhist is not an invisible world, but is commonly described as the extinction of the desiring self. On the other hand, why does belief in the stateless communist utopia at the end of history not qualify as belief in an invisible world? It is hard to know how we should begin to adjudicate this question, given that Smart defines religion in terms of an interior experience that is therefore unavailable to empirical observation. On what basis could Smart dismiss Koestler’s account of his own experience as a communist, which he found to be just as religious as his experience of Christianity?

The most significant problem with Smart’s account for my purposes is that, even if he can find a criterion to separate godless communism—which he calls “religionlike”²³⁶—from “real” religions like godless Buddhism, that separation tells us nothing relevant about how Marxism and Buddhism actually function in the world. The question of violence with which this book is concerned is a question of function: do certain ideologies and practices have more of a tendency to produce violence than do others? The fact that Marxists don’t believe in an experience of the invisible world, even if true, tells us exactly nothing about the tendency of Marxism to produce violence. If we are trying to determine which ideologies and practices have a greater tendency to produce

violence, we are far better served by a relevant category such as absolutism, as we saw in the first chapter; absolutist ideologies do seem to have a much greater risk of producing violence. But there is no good reason to exclude Marxism from a category such as absolutist ideologies. Indeed, it would be hard to find a more absolutist ideology than Marxism, as its tens of millions of victims can attest. The point is that, if we are trying to determine which ideologies and practices have a greater tendency toward violence in the real world, then the kind of distinction between religious and secular that Smart makes is useless. We have a far better chance of success with a functionalist approach that would not exclude ideologies like Marxism on the basis of irrelevant criteria like supposed belief in the invisible world.

Advocates of liberal democracy tend to be more sympathetic with the idea of Marxism or Nazism as religions than with the idea of a civil religion of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, a wide range of scholars have argued that many liberal democracies rely on a strong civil religion to provide a common meaning and purpose for liberal nation-states. In Gentile's definition, civil religion is not a type of "politicization of religion," in which traditional religion merges with the state. Civil religion, though it may occasionally borrow elements from traditional religion, is a new creation that confers sacred status on democratic institutions and symbols.²³⁷ Civil religion is an example of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call the "invention of tradition." Hobsbawm notes the general agreement that we live in an unliturgical age, and in many ways that is true. The rites and customs that structured the hours, days, and seasons of traditional societies have largely faded in the face of Western individual freedoms. Where this generalization does not apply, however, as Hobsbawm points out, is in the public life of the citizen. Here, liberal democratic societies are every bit as "liturgical" as traditional ones: "Indeed most of the occasions when people become conscious of citizenship as such remain associated with symbols and semi-ritual practices (for instance, elections), most of which are historically novel and largely invented: flags, images, ceremonies and music."²³⁸ Rituals which many assume to be ancient are in fact the products of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when rituals were invented in Europe and the United States to stoke a nascent sense of exclusive national loyalty, supplanting previously diffuse loyalties owed to region, ethnic group, class, and church.

According to Carlton Hayes, it is this exclusivity that sets off modern nationalism from previous types of loyalties. Before modernity, people experienced conflicts among their many loyalties to locality and priest, lord and guild, and family: "But nowadays, and herein lies the fundamental difference between us and our ancient and mediaeval and early modern forebears, the

individual is commonly disposed, in case of conflict, to sacrifice one loyalty after another, loyalty to persons, places and ideas, loyalty even to family, to the paramount call of nationality and the national state.”²³⁹ Nationalism qualifies as a religion because of this exclusivity. It is in its exclusivity—its jealousy—that the nation becomes not merely a substitute for the church, but a substitute for God.

Scholars have long noted the way that nationalism has supplanted Christianity as the predominant public religion of the West. Hayes’s 1926 essay, “Nationalism as a Religion,” puts forth this idea, which in 1960 he developed into a book entitled *Nationalism: A Religion*.²⁴⁰ For Hayes, humans are naturally endowed with a “religious sense,” a faith in a power higher than humanity that requires a sense of reverence, usually expressed in external ceremony. Hayes argues that the decline in public Christianity with the advent of the modern state left a vacuum for the religious sense that was filled by the sacralization of the nation, the “enthronement of the national state—*la Patrie*—as the central object of worship.”²⁴¹ According to Hayes, political religion enjoyed the double advantage of being more tangible than supernatural religion and having the physical means of violence necessary to enforce mandatory worship. Benedict Anderson similarly argues that the nation has replaced the church in its role as the primary cultural institution that deals with death. According to Anderson, Christianity’s decline in the West necessitated another way of dealing with the arbitrariness of death. Nations provide a new kind of salvation; my death is not in vain if it is for the nation, which lives on into a limitless future.²⁴²

The term civil religion was introduced by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. In the last chapter of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau proposes an explicit civil religion as a cure for the divisive influence of Christianity, which had divided people’s loyalties between church and state. Rousseau does not wish to erase Christianity entirely, but to reduce it to a “religion of man” that “has to do with the purely inward worship of Almighty God and the eternal obligations of morality, and nothing more.”²⁴³ Civil religion, on the other hand, is the fully public cult of the nation-state: “the sovereign is entitled to fix the tenets of a purely civil creed, or profession of faith. These would not be, strictly speaking, dogmas of a religious character, but rather sentiments deemed indispensable for participation in society.” Rousseau distinguishes here between civil religion and religion “strictly speaking”; by the latter, he seems to mean what Gentile means by traditional religion. This distinction makes little difference, however, in its practical effect. Civil religion has its dogmas, and the consequences of disobedience are severe: “As for that man who, having committed himself publicly to the state’s articles of faith, acts on any occasion as if he does

not believe them, let his punishment be death. He has committed the greatest of all crimes: he has lied in the presence of the laws.”²⁴⁴

After the revolution in 1789, there were many in France who took Rousseau’s ideas to heart and tried to create an active cult of the French nation. There developed a zealous devotion to the myth of the creation of a new humanity in the revolution. After 1791, Catholicism was actively suppressed and attempts were made to invent structures and rituals to inculcate devotion to France itself. Altars to the fatherland were erected, with copies of the French Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man engraved on metal and in stone above them as objects for worship. Rites of civic baptism and civic funerals were invented. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was declared the “national catechism.”²⁴⁵ Most such efforts were short-lived, but France has retained a powerful civil religion, which crystallizes around reverence for its war dead and the sacralization of republican ideals.²⁴⁶

The primary example of civil religion cited by scholars is that of the United States. As early as 1749, Benjamin Franklin had argued for “the Necessity of a *Publick Religion*,” by which he meant a cult of the nation and the duties of the citizen.²⁴⁷ Franklin was typical of Enlightenment figures who looked to the model of republican Rome and saw how religion provided a unified sense of civic duty and loyalty. Thomas Jefferson advocated for the “reverence” of the Declaration of Independence and the “holy purpose” of adherence to it. As Pauline Maier points out, although Jefferson’s draft declaration made no reference to God, and although Jefferson was responsible for the complete separation of church and state in Virginia, Jefferson wrote in the language of medieval Christianity about the preservation of physical things associated with the creation of the declaration: “Small things may, perhaps, like the relics of saints, help to nourish our devotion to this holy bond of Union.” Of the desk on which he drafted the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson expressed his hope that we might see it “carried in the procession of our nation’s birthday, as the relics of the saints are in those of the Church.”²⁴⁸ As Maier notes, throughout the nineteenth century, virulently anti-Catholic leaders were inclined to borrow Catholic imagery to describe the nation’s founding. The founders were “saints,” they raised “altars” of freedom, their houses were “shrines” containing “relics,” and so on.²⁴⁹

The American civil religion differs from the French in that it has tended to operate with the support of the churches. American civil religion is a curious blend of Enlightenment and Christian themes and symbols. It is especially marked by what Gentile calls a “transfer of sacredness” from traditional Christianity to the United States itself.²⁵⁰ American civil religion has often, for example, mined the Puritan use of biblical images. The Puritans famously

identified their colony with a new Israel chosen by God, but John Winthrop's "city on the hill" was not America but the fledgling Puritan colony. This was less difficult to justify biblically as long as the church and civil government were intertwined. With the separation of church and state after the American Revolution, however, the new Israel came to be identified not with the church, but with the United States itself. In American civil religion, the new Israel was not to bring the messiah of Israelite prophecy to the world; rather, the United States would save the world through its creation and spread of democracy, freedom, and progress. The messianic form was taken from biblical Christianity, but the content was supplied by Enlightenment themes.²⁵¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, U.S. progress was increasingly identified with the providence of a generic god, to the point of implicitly deifying the nation. Herman Melville's oft-quoted contention in *White Jacket* that "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time" actually goes beyond the claim to God's blessings and makes the nation itself into a divine reality. Melville continues:

Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world.²⁵²

Christianity, Judaism, and other traditional faiths in America, which are construed as particularistic and voluntary, coexist with a public civil religion of the United States itself, which embraces the whole of the social order and is more than merely voluntary.

Robert Bellah's famous 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America," sparked significant discussion, coming as it did in the midst of the Vietnam War.²⁵³ Bellah identifies "an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" that "has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does."²⁵⁴ Bellah argues that the civic rituals of American life revolve around a unitarian god that underwrites America's sense of purpose in the world. This god, however, is not the Christian God. References to Christ and the church are kept to a private, voluntary sphere of worship.²⁵⁵ The implication of Bellah's argument is that the separation of church and state in the United States is *not* the separation of religion and state. Religion as such is not privatized; traditional religion is privatized, while the religion of politics occupies the public realm.

Although Bellah's article attracted a lot of attention, he was by no means the first scholar to identify Americanism as a religion. Will Herberg had

already claimed, “By every realistic criterion, the American Way of Life is the operative religion of the American people.”²⁵⁶ Herberg defines *operative* religion in a functionalist way as “the system of norms, values, and allegiances actually functioning as such in the ongoing social life of the community.”²⁵⁷ Before Herberg, Carlton Hayes had identified the American religion’s saints (the founding fathers), its shrines (Independence Hall), its relics (the Liberty Bell), its holy scriptures (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution), its martyrs (Lincoln), its inquisition (school boards that enforce patriotism), its Christmas (the Fourth of July), and its feast of Corpus Christi (Flag Day). According to Hayes, the flag occupies the same central place in official ritual that the eucharistic host previously held:

Nationalism’s chief symbol of faith and central object of worship is the flag, and curious liturgical forms have been devised for “saluting” the flag, for “dipping” the flag, for “lowering” the flag, and for “hoisting” the flag. Men bare their heads when the flag passes by; and in praise of the flag poets write odes and children sing hymns. In America young people are ranged in serried rows and required to recite daily, with hierophantic voice and ritualistic gesture, the mystical formula: “I pledge allegiance to our flag and to the country for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Everywhere, in all solemn feasts and fasts of nationalism the flag is in evidence, and with it that other sacred thing, the national anthem.²⁵⁸

If we think that Hayes is exaggerating the function of the Pledge of Allegiance, we need only consult the author of the pledge, Francis Bellamy, who said that the pledge was meant to sink into schoolchildren through ritual repetition, and added, “It is the same way with the catechism, or the Lord’s Prayer.”²⁵⁹

According to Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, “nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries.”²⁶⁰ Marvin and Ingle have identified the flag as the totem object of American civil religion. Their fascinating book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* contains dozens of photographs depicting American reverence for the flag as a sacred object.²⁶¹ The flag is of crucial importance for the U.S. religion because it is that for which Americans will kill and die. For Marvin and Ingle, what makes American patriotism a religion is precisely its ability to organize killing energies. Through close analysis of rituals surrounding war and remembrance of the war dead, Marvin and Ingle argue that it is blood sacrifice on behalf of the nation that constantly renews the nation. The “ultimate sacrifice” for the nation is elaborately ceremonialized in liturgies involving the flag and other

ritual objects. Blood sacrifice is an act of both creation and salvation. At the ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994, for example, President Bill Clinton remarked of the soldiers that died there both that “[t]hey gave us our world” and that “[t]hey saved the world.”²⁶²

For Marvin and Ingle, the transfer of the sacred from Christianity to the nation-state in Western society is seen most clearly in the fact that authorized killing has passed from Christendom to the nation-state. Christian denominations still thrive in the United States, but as optional, inward-looking affairs. They are not publicly true, “[f]or what is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for.”²⁶³ People are not allowed to kill for “sectarian religion,” which is what Gentile means by traditional religion. Only the nation-state may kill. According to Marvin and Ingle, it is this power to organize killing that makes American civil religion the true religion of the U.S. social order.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from this brief survey of some functionalist approaches to religion? The first thing to note is that, if the functionalists are right in saying that secular phenomena like capitalism and nationalism are really religions, then all of the arguments in chapter 1—except that of the functionalist Richard Wentz—fall apart. There is simply no basis for including Islam and Hinduism in the indictment of religious violence while excluding U.S. nationalism and Marxism. And we have good reasons for preferring the functionalist to the substantivist approach. The question “Does religion cause violence?” is a question of how religion functions. If secular nationalism functions in the same way as Islam to produce violence under certain circumstances, there is no reason to indict the latter and ignore the former. Even if we could come up with a substantive way to put Islam and nationalism in different categories—e.g., Islam believes in a “real” God, but the nation as god is “just a metaphor”—for our purposes, it would be as pointless as studying the violence of only ideologies that begin with the letters A through L.

Ultimately, however, functionalist approaches to the question of religion and violence are also unsatisfactory. To argue, as Wentz does, that religion has a peculiar tendency to cause violence, but to include nearly everything people take seriously under the rubric of religion, is not very helpful. At best, it is tautological: people do violence on behalf of those things they take seriously enough to do violence for. We have not learned much about the causes of violence. Not only do functionalist approaches cast the meaning of religion so

widely as to render the category virtually useless, but they also suffer from the same essentialism from which substantivist approaches suffer. Functionalist approaches—like substantivist approaches—tend to assume that there really is something out there called religion that is a constant feature in all human societies across time; functionalists just argue for a more expansive definition of what religion really is, based on how it functions in all places and times. But in doing so, functionalists cling to the kind of transhistorical and transcultural idea of religion that we showed above to be groundless.

So, do we conclude that there is no such thing as religion, no coherent concept of religion, and therefore we need not bother with the question of religion and violence? No. The point is not that there is no such thing as religion. The concepts that we use do not simply refer to things out there in a one-to-one correspondence of words with things. In certain cultures, religion *does* exist, but as a product of human construction. Some scholars have cited James Leuba's *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty different definitions of religion, to conclude that there is no way to define religion. But as Jonathan Z. Smith points out, the lesson is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined more than fifty different ways.²⁶⁴ There is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion, but at different times and places, and for different purposes, some things have been constructed as religion and some things have not. For Western scholars in the nineteenth century, Confucianism was a religion. For Chinese nationalists, it emphatically was not.

Instead of searching—in either a substantivist or functionalist mode—for the timeless, transcultural essence of religion, therefore, let us ask why certain things are called religion under certain conditions. What configurations of power are authorized by changes in the way the concept of religion—and its counterpart, the secular—are used? What changes in practices correspond to changes in these concepts? Why deny that the natives have religion at first, then assign some of their practices to the category religion? Which practices become religion, and why? Why deny that Marxism is a religion? Why accept that Marxism is a religion but emphatically deny that U.S. nationalism is?

Supreme Court justice William Rehnquist acknowledged, in supporting a proposed amendment against “desecration” of the flag, that the flag is regarded by Americans “with an almost mystical reverence.”²⁶⁵ Here, the word “almost” is crucial, for American civil religion must deny that it is religion. Marvin and Ingle ask, and attempt to answer, the key question:

If nationalism is religious, why do we deny it? Because what is obligatory for group members must be separated, as holy things are, from

what is contestable. To concede that nationalism is a religion is to expose it to challenge, to make it just the same as sectarian religion. By explicitly denying that our national symbols and duties are sacred, we shield them from competition with sectarian symbols. In so doing, we embrace the ancient command not to speak the sacred, ineffable name of god. The god is inexpressible, unsayable, unknowable, beyond language. But that god may not be refused when it calls for sacrifice.²⁶⁶

Marvin and Ingle treat nationalism as a real religion, according to their definition.²⁶⁷ But for my purposes, whether or not nationalism is *really* a religion is beside the point. What is crucial are the questions they ask: why deny it is a religion? Why affirm it? What is authorized by either the denial or the affirmation? Why is it acceptable in some contexts for Abraham Lincoln to say that reverence for the Constitution is “the political religion of the nation,”²⁶⁸ or for George W. Bush to say that patriotism is “a living faith” that grows stronger when the United States is threatened?²⁶⁹ Why, in other contexts, is the U.S. constitutional order held as the model of secular government? With regard to the question of violence, why is violence on behalf of the Muslim *umma* religious, but violence on behalf of the American nation-state is secular? What is gained or lost by the insistence that violence on behalf of the United States is of a fundamentally different nature from violence on behalf of Islam?

To answer these types of questions, we must see how the religious-secular distinction is part of the legitimating conceptual apparatus of the modern Western nation-state. As I stated earlier, “the West,” “modernity,” “liberalism,” and so on are not simply monolithic realities, but are *ideals* or *projects* that are always contestable. Part of the function of ideology, however, is to present these projects as based on essential realities that are simply *there*, part of the way things are. As we saw in Locke’s writings, the religious-secular distinction is presented as embedded in the immutable nature of things. In fact, however, this distinction was born with a new configuration of power and authority in the West and was subsequently exported to parts of the world colonized by Europeans. Within the West, religion was invented as a transhistorical and transcultural impulse embedded in the human heart, essentially distinct from the public business of government and economic life. To mix religion with public life was said to court fanaticism, sectarianism, and violence. The religious-secular divide thus facilitated the transfer in the modern era of the public loyalty of the citizen from Christendom to the emergent nation-state. Outside the West, the creation of religion and its secular twin accompanied the attempts of colonial powers and indigenous modernizing elites to marginalize

certain aspects of non-Western cultures and create public space for the smooth functioning of state and market interests.

The idea that religion has a tendency to promote violence is a variation on the idea that religion is an essentially private and nonrational human impulse, not amenable to conflict solving through public reason. In the contemporary context, therefore, the idea that there is something called religion with a tendency to promote violence continues to marginalize certain kinds of discourses and practices while authorizing others. Specifically, the idea that public religion causes violence authorizes the marginalization of those things called religion from having a divisive influence in public life, and thereby authorizes the state's monopoly on violence and on public allegiance. Loyalty to one's religion is private in origin and therefore optional; loyalty to the secular nation-state is what unifies us and is not optional.

None of this implies a grand conspiracy of intellectual and governmental elites to justify state violence. Discourse about the dangers of public religion is rather a normalizing discourse through which we explain to ourselves why things are arranged the way they are. And the dangers warned against are real. When public discourse blames terrorist attacks on religious fanaticism, common sense can see that there are dangerous pathologies linked to some of what is called religion. The problem with the myth of religious violence is not that it condemns certain kinds of violence, but that it diverts moral scrutiny from other kinds of violence. Violence labeled religious is always reprehensible; violence labeled secular is often necessary and sometimes praiseworthy.

Secularism need not be antireligion. It is rather against the undue influence of religion on public life. The first chapter of Martin Marty's *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*—whose stated thesis is “public religion can be dangerous; it should be handled with care”—is followed by his second chapter, entitled “Worth the Risk,” whose stated thesis is “public religion can and does contribute to the common good.”²⁷⁰ Marty tries to show how religion can participate in public life, provided it play by the rules established by the liberal nation-state. It must appeal to publicly accessible reason and avoid conflicts of loyalty between religious beliefs and the values of the nation-state.

It is possible, therefore, for many Americans to consider themselves religious and yet to maintain some version of the idea that the creation of a secular order—and the marginalization or domestication of religion in public life—is the salvation of the social order from the dangers of public religion. The divide between religious and secular must be maintained. We do so out of respect for both the secular and the religious spheres. From the secular point of view, to admit that secular nationalism is just as religious as Islam, for example, would question the whole foundation upon which the secular nation-state claims its

legitimacy. From the religious point of view, it would also invite charges of idolatry. Despite the similarities between what is called religion and nationalism, then, we must deny that nationalism is really a religion. We acknowledge verbally that the nation and the flag are not *really* gods. The crucial test, however, is what people do with their bodies. It is clear that, among those who identify themselves as Christians in the United States, there are very few who would be willing to kill in the name of the Christian God, whereas the willingness, under certain circumstances, to kill and die for the nation in war is generally taken for granted. The religious-secular distinction thus helps to maintain the public and lethal loyalty of Christians to the nation-state, while avoiding direct confrontation with Christian beliefs about the supremacy of the Christian God over all other gods.

In this chapter, I have argued for two conclusions: first, that the religious-secular divide upon which the myth of religious violence depends is not a transhistorical and transcultural reality, and second, that it is part of the legitimating mythology of the modern liberal state. In the next two chapters, I will give more historical specificity to this second claim, first by examining the tale of the wars of religion and its place in legitimating the modern state in chapter 3, and then in chapter 4 by examining the contemporary uses of the myth of religious violence in marginalizing domestic religion and justifying the use of force against non-Western, especially Muslim, Others.