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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CATEGORY OF ‘RELIGION’ IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Abstract

For some decades, the academic concept of religion has been examined critically by a number of scholars. There have been some sociological responses to these criticisms against ‘religion’. This article argues that these sociological responses have missed important implications of these criticisms, which can be constructively incorporated into sociological discourse about religion. What can be meaningfully studied is the practice of classification carried out with the term ‘religion’ and norms and imperatives which govern and naturalise a specific discursive configuration of the religious-secular dichotomy. This approach indicates the vacuum in the sociological discourse of religion, which needs to be filled with empirical research, in order to map and theorize the ways in which people utilize the term ‘religion’ in a specific social context.

Keywords: religion, the secular, dichotomy, category, sociology

Introduction

This article urges sociologists to pay more critical attention to the practice of classifying and categorizing the term ‘religion’ in society and in their own academic discourse. Such critical reflections on the category ‘religion’ should be brought to a central place within sociological discourse on religion. More specifically, the critical examination of the concept ‘religion’, and of its demarcations with ostensibly non-religious secular categories, should be more constructively integrated into sociological discourse on religion. Each different conceptualisation of ‘religion’ and its demarcation from other categories are products of a specific historical circumstance, within particular social relations, driven by particular norms and imperatives. The area of this critical examination includes not only the category of religion in different historical and geographical contexts, but also the notion of religion constructed within sociological literature.

The following argument has been informed by a body of theory often referred to as ‘critical religion’ (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000, 2007a, 2007b; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 2007a; 2007b; 2011).
The goal of this article is, echoing Goldenberg (2013: 40), «to build an argument for curtailing the use of category of ‘religion’.» This involves the interrogation of ‘religion’ as an analytical category. However, this neither means that we should abandon all the analytical categories, nor justify their analytical use. My own position to analytical categories in general is that whenever a specific term is used analytically, the purpose and intention of its use must be made clear. Otherwise, norms and imperatives implicit in such utilization, which involves the practice of classification, must be critically examined. In this spirit, any analytical concept should be strategically replaced or abandoned when it consequently serves the hegemonic power which was supposed to be critiqued in the first place. In the case of ‘religion’, the term and its proclaimed separation from the secular «constitute a fundamental constituent of modernity» (Fitzgerald 2011: 5). On this basis, my own position concerning the analytical term ‘religion’ is that it should be avoided at all or, if necessary, replaced with a more specific category. This article suggests therefore that rather than study religion as such as if it were an observable phenomenon, sociologists should investigate the classificatory practice which employs the generic category ‘religion’ within a specific social context. In this light, I am in agreement with Arnal and McCutcheon (2013: 28) who argue that «the academic future of religion as a concept will need to focus on deconstructing the category and analysing its function within popular discourse … rather than assuming that the category has content and seeking to specify what the content is». This article presents an agenda in supporting the systematic critical study of religious-secular dichotomy. Such an approach involves mapping and theorizing various processes in which a particular social action or institution becomes presumed to be ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious/secular’ within diverse social contexts. As a short theoretical discussion, the first section clarifies the aim of this article by reviewing sociologists’ responses to the recent critiques against the category ‘religion’. This section is followed by a critical examination of the notion of religion in Britain. As a reference point of a generalized idea of religion in Britain, the classification of ‘religion’ referred to in Grace Davie’s *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (1994) is employed. The interrogation of the notion of religion manifested in this sociology-of-religion literature aims to unpack historically and culturally-specific constructions of the term in Britain. The article concludes with implications for further research. What remain missing in sociological studies are empirical and systematic examinations of the meaning of ‘religion’ (and non-religion or the secular) in a specific sociocultural context where the term is being utilized and circulated.

Turning the question of ‘religion’ around

Over recent decades, the concept of religion has been critically examined and deconstructed. Its usefulness as an analytical category has been questioned (Fitzgerald 2000, 2007a, 2011; McCutcheon 1997, 2001; Arnal and McCutcheon 2013). These scholars critically approach the use of the term from a postcolonial perspective, which was famously taken by Edward Said, and from a poststructuralist perspective, exemplified
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by Foucauldian discourse analysis. The category of religion, as the binary opposite of the secular, is a by-product of the specific historical and cultural circumstances of Western modernity (Asad 1993, 2003; Cavanaugh 2009; Nongbri 2013). When its Western imperial legacy is revealed, its cross-cultural applications attract postcolonial critiques (Fitzgerald 2007b). In many parts of the world, there was no equivalent word for ‘religion’, but the concept of religion was often imposed upon various cultures by Western colonial powers (Chidester 1996; Josephson 2012). What these critical perspectives indicate is that ‘religion’ is a socially constructed category and that its social construction should be a subject of a sociological examination (Johansen 2011; Jeldtoft and Johansen 2012). Importantly, the theoretical basis of these perspectives is fundamentally different from so-called ‘post-secular’ debates, in which «the basic separations between religion and other categories are maintained» (Johansen 2013: 11). Unlike the ‘post-secular’ thesis, the following discussion questions «the basic structures of and premises for the sociological study of religion» (Johansen 2013: 11).

This kind of critical examination of the category of religion, in my opinion, has not been constructively considered by many sociologists. When such an examination is posited, sociologists acknowledge the critique but only partially reflect them in their own sociological discourses of religion, continuing the analytical use of the concept.

The first example is Andrew McKinnon’s (2002) debate over sociological definitions of religion, «in junction with recent criticisms of the concept of ‘religion’ in religious studies» (2002: 61). To begin with, McKinnon affirms: «There is no essence of religion outside the discourse of religion» (2002: 81). Then, pointing out «real social consequences» of «concepts like ‘religion’» (2002: 81), however, he subtly justifies the generic category of religion in his sociological discourse. In his response to the criticism made by Fitzgerald (2003), McKinnon (2006: 180) emphasizes «a latent consensus on what ‘religion’ means», which according to him, is implicitly shared by sociologists of religion. In my opinion, this kind of defence of the sociological concept of religion against the recent critiques of ‘religion’ misses the important point which can be constructively examined sociologically. That is, the construction of such latent consensus should be historicized and what should be a subject of critical inquiry is «real social consequences» of such a latent consensus.

Another similar example is Bruce (2011) who interprets the critical views against ‘religion’ taken by Fitzgerald (2000), Asad (1993), and others, as «post-modern approaches which argue that there is actually no such thing as religion because ‘religion’ is a modern social construct» (Bruce 2011: 107). By taking these critical approaches narrowly as an attack against sociological definitions of ‘religion’, Bruce argues, as a defence of his own «relaxed attitude to defining religion» (2011: 116), that recent debates in sociology of religion is often «nothing hinged on the definition of religion» (2011: 116) since these debates focus on «the practical identification and measurement of the features of the social phenomenon» (2011: 107) which are commonly known as ‘religion’ in a particular society. In this context, when a definition is required, religion is defined in a way «to encompass what most people mean when they talk of religion» (2011: 112).
This completely misses more important points that what Bruce calls «post-modern approaches» to religion have been trying to address. Their attentions focus on the construction of the modern notion of ‘religion’ as a generic category as the binary opposite of the non-religious secular. What they examine is the social process of classification, which is carried out by the employment of this modern idea of ‘religion’. This is not to completely dismiss the values of a number of empirical or ethnographical studies on various commonly known or self-identified ‘religious’ institutional affiliations, practices and beliefs. What «post-modern approaches» are interested in is that the ways in which all these are socially and historically categorized as ‘religion’ (as opposed to ‘secular’) as well as how the term ‘religion’ is utilized as a resource to serve specific norms and imperatives at different levels of society.

When Bruce says «what matters about definitions is their usefulness» (2011: 116), «post-modern approaches» would be in an agreement with him that definitions of religion, hence categorizing and classifying certain institutions, movements, practices, and value orientations as ‘religion’, can be useful in specific ways. The issue is that it is ‘useful’ in relation to specific norms and imperatives. In a wider social context, a specific conceptualization of ‘religion’ can be utilized for a particular purpose. For example, it can be useful for a modern nation state to define its jurisdiction and to maintain its hegemony over its domain by defining competing value orientations as ‘religion’, while it also may be useful for some groups and individuals for gaining legal protection, gaining tax benefits, shedding the ‘cult’ label, and gaining respect (Aldridge 2007: 17–28). In my opinion, these are very important subject matters for sociologists, but are largely ignored in the sociologists’ defences of ‘religion’.

In this light, Aldridge (2007) rightly points out: «For individuals, as well as for social movements and social institutions, definitions of religion are not neutral, but demonstrate the power of the definer over the defined» (2007: 30). Nevertheless, this does not become the main focus of his sociology of religion. In his book, Aldridge spends only a few pages in one of the chapters, and confusingly describes his short but critical analysis of ‘religion’, as «the advantages and disadvantages to religious institutions and movements of being categorized as a ‘religion’» (2007: 8, emphasis added). In his analysis of the intrinsically arbitral nature of the category of religion, Aldridge maintained the term ‘religious’ as a generic category to denote a distinctive type of institutions and movements, as if he knows what essentially ‘religious’ is, in spite of that he discusses how these ostensible ‘religious’ institutions and movements can be excluded from the category of religion in another context. Although Aldridge demonstrated his awareness that the category of religion itself can be a subject of critical investigation, overall he maintains the term ‘religion’ as a generic category, rather than analysing such categorization.

Whereas Aldridge’s critical engagement with the category of religion is limited and underdeveloped, it echoes with Beckford’s (2003: 2) call for «a radical shift of focus» in the social scientific perspective in religion. He continues:

It means abandoning the tendency to regard religion as a relatively well-defined object. It also means examining critically the social processes whereby certain things are counted as religious.
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No less interesting to social scientists are the processes whereby prevailing concepts of religion are extended, challenged or rejected. Finally, it means taking seriously the changes that occur over time in everyday conceptualisation of religion (Beckford 2003: 2–3).

In his book *Social Theory and Religion*, Beckford (2003: 3) seeks to «analyse the process whereby the meaning of the category of religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, recast, and so on». One might become confused, however, to find that his apparently «social constructionist perspective» (Beckford 2003: 10) on ‘religion’ maintains generic usage of the term throughout the book. For example, immediately after he claims that «in my view, ‘religion’ is a social and cultural construct with highly variable meaning», Beckford self-evidently describes the «so-called New Age spiritualities and therapies» as «late-modern forms of religion», and the growing popularity of these as «religious change» (2003: 5). In addition, a similar problem can be found when he states:

To put my argument in its most radical form, I doubt whether it is helpful to theorise about ‘religion’, as if it were a generic concept, when the aim is to produce social scientific analysis of the astonishingly varied phenomena to which people attributed religious significance (Beckford 2003: 16).

In this sentence, while he criticises the generic conceptualization of ‘religion’, Beckford still identifies diverse phenomena considered to be of «religious significance». In spite of his initial critique of ‘religion’, his persistent employment of the adjective ‘religious’ throughout the book generates the generic sense of ‘religion’, which is lurking behind the apparent critique of the concept. Thus, the critical imperatives towards the category of religion become constantly obscured. Whereas Beckford makes important remarks throughout the book, it appears that the leitmotif of the entire book, «the social construction of the meaning of religion» (Beckford 2003: 197), loses its momentum because Beckford gives the term ‘religion’ independent ontology at the same time as he critically analyse the same category.

In the case of Peter Beyer’s responses to what he calls «the trenchant critiques of religion and (world) religions» (Beyer 2003: 152), he reviews major critiques on the term ‘religion’ articulated by scholars such as W. C. Smith, J. Z. Smith, Asad, Fitzgerald, Chidester, and McCutcheon (Beyer 2003). A close reading of Beyer’s defence for the sociological concept of religion, however, indicates that his conclusion actually ends where «the trenchant critiques» begin. Considering these critical scholars’ main arguments against «the perceived problems with the concept of religion», Beyer (2003: 150) maintains that «the word and concept of religion in today’s world are not just important among scholars of religion, theologians, and people who are both». He continues:

Rather they are used and widely understood by great many other people: not just western colonialisits, but non-westerners and non-colonialist; not just in western languages but as corresponding words in virtually every other major language around the world (Beyer 2003: 150–151).
Whereas it is such social significance of the term ‘religion’ in the global scale that has
driven critical scholars to unveil ideological functions of the category, for Beyer, this
has become his justification to defend the analytical use of the term in his sociology of
religion.

In other words, Beyer claims that «the religions have an undeniable social concrete-
ness» (Beyer 2003: 151), because ‘religion’ is an historically differentiated social
domain, which has established its distinction from other differentiated institutional
2003: 153). At this point, the critical scholars critiqued by Beyer would agree with him.
Given this, while Beyer continues to «behave as if the religions were an evident real-
ity» (Beyer 2003: 152), this has become the reason for those critical scholars to refuse
the analytical use of the category ‘religion’, and turned it into a subject of critical study.
Beyer does not seem to recognize that what these critical scholars on ‘religion’ inter-
rogate is the norms and imperatives which govern the differentiation and demarcation
between ‘religion’ and ostensibly non-religious secular domains. This kind of critical
analysis inevitably undermines the conceptual foundation upon which Beyer’s dis-
course stands.

Beyer (2003: 151) maintains an independent ontology of ‘religion’ as an analytical
category by claiming: it remains nonetheless that religion in contemporary global
society seems to be an ineluctable reality at least as important and real as a number of
other abstractions like culture, race, nation, and gender on the one hand, and sport,
health, and art, on the other.

To clarify what is missing in Beyer’s argument against «the trenchant critiques» on
‘religion’, it is worth pointing out that, like other abstractions listed by Beyer, ‘religion’
should be understood as «an empty signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially
and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations» (Taira 2013a: 26). In
other words, the term ‘religion’ as an empty signifier, «can be activated with defini-
tions, meanings, and communicational practices» (Struckrad 2013: 17). Pointing out
this ‘emptiness’ of the category does not mean that religion (however defined) does not
exist. ‘Emptiness’ is the very nature of any social category, and this does not mean that
these are ‘unreal’ and unimportant. The empty category of religion is ‘real’ and impor-
tant, as Beckford (2003: 24) rightly highlighted, «in the sense of producing effects on
some human lives and societies». Therefore, what can be meaningfully studied about
‘religion’ is the processes of communicational generation, legitimatization, and nego-
tiation of meaning systems» (Struckrad 2013: 18) carried out by the employment of the
term ‘religion’ in a specific historical and social context.

Another important issue to note regards definitions of religion. This article is not
another attempt to define what religion is. Rather, it suggests a critical investigation of
ways in which the concept of religion is implicitly or explicitly defined as a generic
category within a particular classification system in a specific social context. Asad
(1993: 29) rightly argues that «definition is itself the historical product of discursive
processes». In a similarly critical tone, Hanegraaff (1999: 364) notes that definitions of
religion (and the sacred) are «intellectual artefacts invented by certain persons for
reasons in certain socio-cultural contexts». In order for the term ‘religion’ to exist
meaningfully in sociological discourse therefore, «the first task of the sociologist is to find what religion means to any social group» (Budd 1973: 364). Many sociologists acknowledge criticisms against ‘religion’ up to this point, but typically continue using ‘religion’ as a generic concept, justifying such usage by claiming it reflects the common meaning of the term. In contrast, my view is that sociologists should avoid referring to different traditions, institutions, groups, practices and beliefs collectively as ‘religion’ in their own terms, without clearly indicating the classifier’s norms and imperatives. Given this, what can be studied more meaningfully is the social practice of classification by utilizing the term ‘religion’.

‘Religion’ in Britain

It is difficult to generalize what is meant by ‘religion’ in Britain. Different individuals, groups, and institutions often express different notions of religion from each other. The discrepancies between different claims of ‘religion’, however, provide us with a starting point for critical analysis of the category of religion. For this purpose, this section of the article employs typology and categorization from Grace Davie’s Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging (1994). As the main title indicates, this book is an exposition of the empirical findings, as commonly understood and measured, in Britain. It employs the categories used by the official sources of statistics. In addition, as the subtitle of the book Believing without Belonging suggests, what is meant by ‘religion’ in this book consists of particular types of beliefs and sense of belonging. In both areas, as the following paragraphs in this section demonstrate, the construction of the category ‘religion’, and its demarcation with the non-religious secular, are related to specific desires of classifiers and power relations in society. The following paragraphs interrogate the generic category of religion utilized in this book by Davie, and constructed by the sources she refers to. This is not to single out Davie’s work for attack, but to demonstrate a critical examination of ‘religion’ and to investigate the ideological configuration of the category within the wider social and historical context.

Atheism

Reflecting upon the particular historical and geographical context of Britain, the notion of belief examined in Religion in Britain (1994), as a major component of British ‘religion’, involves the concept of god(s), while other kinds of beliefs are somehow regarded as non-religion or the secular. For example, Davie excludes ‘atheism’ from her the category of religion. She denotes ‘atheists’ as those who «have opted out of religion altogether». This indicates the general (including Davie’s own) assumption that ‘atheism’ and ‘religion’ are somehow essentially different entities from each other. However, when atheism is actually «a set of complex systems of beliefs» (LeDrew 2014) and Davie conceptualizes the notion of religion in terms of belief, atheism’s disqualification from ‘religion’ is contradictory.
The construction of the atheism-religion separation is not limited to the academic discourse of religion. The same sort of conceptual demarcation has been deployed by the popular form of atheism, or the so-called New Atheism. According to LeDrew (2012), the beginning of this phenomenon was signalled by the publication of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* in 2006. Dawkins and his fellow atheist writers critique ‘religion’. They utilize the term, without clearly specifying content, as a generic category, as though it is a neutral, descriptive and self-evident signifier. This kind of deployment of the term ‘religion’, and its critique, are required in atheist literature in order to authorize their own discourse as somehow more ‘objective’ and ‘rational’ accounts of the world.

The ideological commitments implicit in the atheist construction of religious-secular binary are grounded upon specific forms of liberalism. LeDrew’s (2012) historical analysis indicates that the New Atheism is an extension of «the scientific atheism that emerged in the Victorian period» (2012: 81). This is constituted by «political liberalism and a defence of the Enlightenment principle of progress, universalism and scientific rationalism» (2012: 77). Therefore, the taken-for-granted classification and self-identification of atheism as non-religious secular, legitimates the social structure of liberal capitalist states. The close relationship between the construction of religious-secular dichotomy, on the one hand, and liberal ideology, on the other hand, suggests the close association between the religious-secular dichotomy and the operation of the liberal capitalist state. This understanding has led Fitzgerald (2012) to proclaim: «Dawkins is ideological state apparatus».

Nationalism

Returning to the configuration of ‘religion’ in Davie’s *Religion in Britain* (1994), the relationship between the notion of religion and the state is more explicitly found in the taken-for-granted demarcation between religion and nationalism. While Davie conceptualizes ‘religion’ in terms of belief, the categorization of religion in her book excludes nationalism. Although Davie uses the term «civic religion» to denote nationalism, in her discussion on nationalism in Britain, she regards the symbolism of the royal family which represents the nation as «national» and «civic», while the monarch’s ecclesiastical relationships are «something sacred» and «more specifically religious» (Davie 1994: 86). This cannot be taken for granted when Carlton Hayes (1960), for example, explicitly claims that nationalism is a religion, and Marvin and Ingle (1996: 767) assert: «Structurally speaking, nationalism mirrors sectarian systems of belief such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and others that are more conventionally labelled as religious».

Nonetheless, explicitly describing British national symbols, such as the Queen and the Union Jack, as ‘religious’ would be counter-intuitive. This is because of the commonly shared assumption that nationalism as non-religious secular rises above the category of religion. This seems akin to the doctrine of secularism, which institutes the separation of the state from the ostensible entity called ‘religion’. According to Arnal (2001), this is achieved by creating «enclosures that serve to segregate positive ends-
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oriented behavior, to minimize the social impact of subjectively determined human goals and desires» (2001: 1). In this way, by interpellating challenging value orientations as ‘religion’, the state maintains its hegemony. The idea of nationalism as non-religious secular sentiment legitimizes and naturalizes norms and imperatives of the state (Cavanaugh 2009; Martin 2010). In this light, the category of religion, as the binary opposite of the secular, is what Althusser (2008) called «ideological state apparatus».

This can be further clarified below by critically examining other ostensibly ‘religious’ categories utilized as the scheme of Davie’s Religion in Britain (1994), corresponding to her notion of belonging. Referring to various statistics, what Davie refers to as «the major religious groups» in Britain in the post-war period includes «the Anglicans, the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, the free churches (including Black African churches and house churches), other-faith communities and new religious movements» (Davie 1994: 51).

Christian beliefs and churches

First of all, the types of Christian beliefs and institutions such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Free Church are classified as ‘religion’ for particular historical reasons. Here, the formation of the modern liberal democratic state played a crucial role. In medieval English language, ‘religion’ meant the Christian Truth which encompassed the totality of the church-state and its subjects (Fitzgerald 2007a; Cavanaugh 2009: 57–122; Nongbri 2013). Historically, however, the state (in the form of parliament) gradually separated from the Church. In this process, the term ‘religion’ became associated exclusively with the church, rather than the state (Cavanaugh 1995). In the wider European context, in which the Anglican Church co-exists, the invention of the term ‘religion’, as separate from the state, appeared in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the dominance of the state over the Church was established (Fitzgerald 2007a; Cavanaugh 2009: 57–122; Nongbri 2013).

The term ‘religion’ currently attached to the Anglican Church, for example, is the product of a past political struggle with the emerging power of the modern nation state. Applying Naomi Goldenberg’s hypothesis of «vestigial states» (Goldenberg 2012, 2013, forthcoming) to her analysis of the current state of the Anglican Church, Jasper (2012) explains, «Anglican Christianity, at one time a fully integrated element of government, is now increasingly cordoned off from day to day influence by the deployment of the discursive category ‘religion’, that is defined in terms of its own insignificance in relation to the ‘secular’ state».

The analytical framework of «vestigial state» may be applied to the taken-for-granted categorization of the Orthodox as a ‘religion’, in order to articulate the historical process in which Orthodox churches were classified as ‘religion’ when the modern form of government developed in respective countries. Lenin’s deployment of the category of religion in his critique of the Russian Orthodox Church is one example (Fitzgerald 2011).
The Free Church became historically classified as ‘religion’ in a very different way from that of the Anglican Church. In English history, the modern notion of religion can also be traced back to the Toleration Act of 1689. Under this Act, so-called nonconformists or what Davie calls the Free Church received the constitutional guarantee of freedom to practice their ‘religions’. Nonconformists were seen as ‘heretics’ as opposed to the Anglican ‘religion’. As the state gradually separated from the Church, the discourse of «religious toleration» functioned as «the tool through which the State divides and conquers the Church» (Cavanaugh 1995: 407).

Such an ideological function of ‘tolerance’ was implicit in the fact that Catholics were mysteriously excluded from this 17th century category of ‘religion’. According to Cavanaugh (1995: 407), «Catholics, of course, were excluded from the Toleration Act, not because of lingering religious bigotry, but because the Catholics in England had as yet not fully accepted that the State had won». This indicates that the implicitly accepted categorization of Catholic as ‘religion’ is a historical product of the power struggle between the Pope and the modern state. By successfully categorizing Catholic as ‘religion’, the state has established dominance over the Pope, at least within its own territory.

Other faith groups, legal recognitions and identity claims
Additionally, in the section entitled «Other-faith Communities», Davie (1994) discusses Muslim and Hindu in Britain in terms of «religious pluralism», which infers the categorization of Islam and Hinduism as ‘religion’. The inclusion of Islam and Hinduism has been an important part in the historical process by which Western colonial powers extended its hegemonic power into so-called ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ parts of the world. Traditions and value orientations which had been classified as ‘Islam’ or ‘Hinduism’ as well as other ‘religious’ traditions were excluded from the operation of the ‘secular’ state (e.g. Asad 1993, 2003; King 1999; Pennington 2005; Sugirtharajah 2003). Similar criticisms have been made against the categories of Buddhism and Sikhism, unpacking the colonial contexts from which these terms were invented (Oberoi 1994; Almond 1988). Adding other traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Bahá’í, all these constitute the umbrella category of ‘World Religions’, which is also loaded with colonial preconception, assuming the Western superiority over the acknowledged cultural diversity (Masuzawa 2005).

Regarding the concept of new religious movements, Davie (1994: 67) points out that this is an «inevitably problematic category» with respect of which groups should be included or not. Although the category has no clear boundary, importantly, the category of new religious movements includes many groups which otherwise have been, or might be called ‘cults’. This word ‘cult’ has been used to disparage specific faith groups. In this context, the term ‘new religious movements’ is preferably and strategically employed by sociologists as a more neutral signifier, because the use of the negative label such as ‘cult’ can «obfuscate rather than increase» the sociological knowledge of the group (Barker 2009).
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This suggests specific intentions and desires of the classifiers and the classified over the category of religion. This can be exemplified in Scientology’s attempt to acquire formal ‘religious’ status in Britain. While the group has been included in the sociological category of new religious movements, it has not been recognized as such in Britain by the Charity Commission, specifically, for the purpose of the Charity Law. Conversely, in another context, «The UK Supreme Court has decided that Scientology is a religion and that its churches constitute a ‘place of meeting for religious worship’ applicable to the requirement of the Marriage Act 1949» (Ekklesia 2013). In his study of the Pagan Federation’s failed application to be a recognized ‘religion’ by the Charity Commission, York (2003) makes the following remark:

In England and Wales, apart from the influence and proclamations of the mass media, acceptance of identity as religious is the product of an ongoing negotiation between the often conflicting pragmatic efforts of a number of governmental institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the Home Office, and the Charity Commission (2003: 265).

This echoes Starr’s (1992) observation of the classification system in liberal democratic society. The lines drawn between religion and non-religion are highly arbitrary, while «the legal system must draw boundaries» (1992: 273). Given this, it is important to stress that these «boundaries are policy choices» which are also inseparable «from the merits of the claims made with them» (1992: 273).

To be classified as ‘religion’ is also an important aspect of the so-called ‘identity politics’, specially for minority groups. For example, in Britain, talking about ‘hijab’ and ‘turban’ in terms of ‘religion’ constructs a specific discursive field in which the wearing of these garments can be negotiated as a wearer’s constitutional right to exercise their ‘religious’ freedom. In this context, the category of religion functions as «a resource for claiming right, privileges and legitimacy» (Taira 2013b: 477). In other words, «‘religion’ is effective in allowing relatively marginal people and groups to have a voice» (2013b: 486). In this line of argument, Taira analyses the recent emergence of Jediism in the UK. He discusses that the claim to be ‘religion’ by Jedists and their reference of themselves as a ‘religious’ minority «might play a part in downplaying the privileges already given to Muslims and others on the basis of ‘religion’» (2013b: 486). He concludes:

Therefore, Jedis’ claims to have a ‘religion’ are partly tactical moves in defending their rights and cultural position. Moreover, it is expressed in the context of a society in which predominantly white male youth feel they are losing their traditionally more secure positions and opportunities (Taira 2013b: 486).

The concept of religion is a construct that varies in meaning across time and place. In this sense, the task of the sociologist is to study the process to distinguish between religion and the non-religious secular, which are often «the outcome of intention, policies, strategies and campaigns» (Beckford 2003: 8).
Conclusion and implications for further research

As Beckford (2003: 20) suggests, it is better to recognize that a universal definition of ‘religion’ is unattainable. What is meant by ‘religion’ is often contradictory and contentious between different users of the term. Many sociologists acknowledge these difficulties with the category of religion. It seems that they feel the need to find a way to move beyond the problem. However, they still continue to utilize the term as a generic category, as if they know what religion is, or as if they are convinced that any further involvement in critical examinations of the term ‘religion’ would only cause them to get stuck in the quagmire of the category. By contrast, this article suggests one practical way forward beyond the problem, namely turning the category of religion itself into a subject of critical inquiry. This article has not utilized ‘religion’ as a generic category, but such utilization is critically examined within a specific social and historical context in which it occurs. It proposes that we can study critically in a more meaningful way is the social construction and utilization of the generic category of religion.

In this light, what sociologists of religion can add to their teaching and research would be critical reflections on what is meant by the term ‘religion’ to different individuals and groups in different contexts of social relations and critical examinations of discrepancies between different meanings of the term. In my view, this should be done from the most basic level of academic discourse. For example, an introductory textbook for undergraduate sociology students, co-authored by Fulcher and Scott (2007), has a chapter entitled «Religion, belief, and meaning». This chapter starts with the description of Cassandra Latham, who is said to be a witch, and it explains: «Witches are followers of the Wiccan religion» (Fulcher and Scott 2007: 406). This is further accompanied by a quotation from a newspaper article stating: «Paganism … is a very respectable religion» (2007: 407). In my view, these statements are problematic. First of all, this text book assumes that Cassandra Latham practices a religion. However, in personal correspondence with the author, she describes her practice of «folk magic» as «a skill/craft», and explicitly refuses to be associated with the term «religion». In her opinion, «religion is an organized structure with a liturgy and priesthood etc.», against which she measures her practice. Secondly, sociologists may assume that Wicca is a religion but the Wicca practitioners may not identify their practice as ‘religion’ (Taira 2010). Finally, while sociologists may presume that Paganism is a religion, the British Pagan Association’s application to be an officially recognized religion in Britain, has been repeatedly rejected by the Charity Commission (York 2003). In addition, Cassandra Latham claims paganism is a «lifestyle choice», rather than a religion. Instead of uncritically categorizing something as religion, what can be meaningfully studied are all these different identifications of ‘religion’ claimed in a variety of social relations.

The notion of ‘religion’ is utilized, with norms and imperatives, within particular historical, ideological, and cultural settings. In other words, any form of boundary making between religion and the non-religion secular serves specific norms and imperatives. The religious-secular dichotomy is not ideologically neutral. Thus, this dichotomy itself should be a subject of critical investigation. Having historicized and analysed diverse constructions of ‘religion’, it appears that a very simple but important
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question remains unexamined: What do people mean by religion? This question has not been seriously considered. This appears to have important implications for further research.

In 2010, British Social Attitudes Survey asked the questions: «Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? IF YES, which?» The following options were given: «no religion», «Church of England/Anglican», «Roman Catholic», «Other Christian», or «Non-Christian». The result includes 50 per cent of respondents ticked «no religion» and 20 per cent as «Church of England/Anglican» (Lee 2012: 175). A similar question was repeated in the following year when the 2011 UK census for England and Wales asked the question: «What is your religion?» This question was followed by the options of «no religion», «Christian», «Buddhist», «Hindu», «Jewish», «Muslim» and «Sikh». In this, 59.3 per cent of the population ticked the box for «Christianity», and 25 per cent ticked «no religion» (Office for National Statistics 2012: 1–2). Such statistics may tell us something about people’s self-identification. The problem, however, is that it does not tell us about what these people actually mean by ‘religion’ and how they utilize the term and interpret it in their everyday lives.

In this regard, there are some interesting studies. For example, although it is not her intention to reveal what ‘religion’ means for respondents, it is worth noting that Day (2011) explores the meaning behind the ostensibly ‘Christian’ identification, which is represented in the UK census’ religion question. Day argues that people use these options to identify themselves in relation to their nationality, ethnicity, or other kinds of groups to which they belong. This echoes Voas and Bruce (2004) who relate ostensibly ‘Christian’ identity in the British population with anxiety about national identity. Lee (2014), on the other hand, carried out an in-depth investigation of people who self-identify as ‘non-religious’. She suggests that the generic ‘non-religious’ identities are used by people to «express substantive positions and public identities» (2014: 466). Given this, it seems to be wrong to assume that what people mean by ‘religion’ in the generic sense, is somehow self-evident.

The fact that ‘religion’ questions can be asked at all in the aforementioned social surveys, and the fact that people know how to respond to them, suggests that ‘religion’ is not a meaningless term. However, we cannot assume that ‘religion’ denotes the same aspect of human lives for different individuals within a diversity of social relations. Meanings and nuances of the term vary. What these surveys and other related studies of religion do not show is what people mean by ‘religion’ and the variety of its meanings. What is urgently required now is empirical and systematic analysis of meaning for the term ‘religion’ which is located in the particular context of its usage, at different levels of discourses, including the lay understanding of the term. The diversity in conceptual boundaries, meanings and utilizations needs to be mapped across society. This strategy has been mentioned, for example, by Beckford (2003: 20) but has never been central to his and others’ sociologies of religion. Thus, what must be laid is such an empirical foundation, upon which a critical academic study of religious-secular dichotomy can be built.
References


Masuzawa, Tomoko 2005. The Invention of World Religions: or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism. London: University of Chicago Press.


