PARADIGMS BEHIND (AND BEFORE)
THE MODERN CONCEPT OF RELIGION

CATHERINE BELL

ABSTRACT

This essay identifies five paradigms that are basic to understanding the historical emergence and uses of the generic idea of “religion” in the Christian cultures of Europe and America. The spread of this concept has been sufficiently thorough in recent centuries as to make religion appear to be a “social fact,” to use Durkheim’s phrase, rather than so many cultural expressions and different social practices. The supremacy of Euro-American culture—and an academy still saturated with Christian ideas—has enjoined other cultures and forms of religiosity to conform to this idea of religion; for these cultures contentment with the status quo can vie with the anxieties of influence, including “modernization.” The key paradigms discussed are the following: Christianity as the prototype; religion as the opposite of reason; the modern formulation of “world religions”; the cultural necessity of religion; and critical analysis of the Western “construction” of religion. These paradigms demonstrate the limits on theoretical variety in the field, the difficulty in making real changes in set ways of thinking, and productive foci for interdisciplinary methods of study.

I. INTRODUCTION: PARADIGMS AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Some projections of current global political and economic forces suggest that religion could eclipse nationalism and ethnicity as the source of future friction and fighting. Samuel Huntington’s much criticized fear of a coming “clash” of religious civilizations may or may not prove correct, but there is no question that here and now many local clashes as well as pervasive global tensions are routinely imagined in terms of the different goals of different religious cultural traditions—from the political speeches of George W. Bush to those of Osama Bin Laden. Yet are the multiple social and cultural differences involved in these current clashes adequately, or usefully, described as religious? Even before Huntington, of course, scholars with historical or anthropological backgrounds invoked the notion of “religious cultures” in order to express both the power of religious socialization over time and space, as well as the vague inadequacy of the idea of religion itself in capturing the full scope of the social traditions and mores involved. But historians


should be wary of any fresh reification of religious identities. The clearest example of how tissue layers of meaning can build up into a popular conception and the accompanying labeling of a religious tradition can be found in even a cursory exploration of the paradigms that have constructed the notion of religion itself. Such an examination makes clear the obvious: that “religion” is a historical term like all other terms and phenomena. That is, it emerged at some point in time with a set of uses and was pressed into much wider application when it became useful in naming something that previously did not exist or did not need a name.

The analysis that follows is an initial and therefore somewhat idiosyncratic exercise to try to isolate both some key layers among the paradigms that have shaped our current notion of religion, as well as the variety of explorations emanating from these paradigms that are shaping the field of religious studies and that are likely to shape the historical study of religion as well. It must be said, however, that I am not a historian and can show little respect for disciplinary boundaries. In addition, I draw on far too much material to do so well in all cases. My goal, however, is to develop some sense of the construction of an evolving term that remains very critical today, although with what one suspects must be constant changes of emphasis. My working premise—that this historical process is not necessarily a logical or internally directed one—may allow for a light touch in repeatedly shuffling through the cards of history in the attempt to catch a glimpse of a partial storyline or just a consistency of discontinuities.

In brief, my storyline is to explore a handful of key paradigms that have been and still are basic to academic understandings of religion in a number of fields. I use the term “paradigm” here in its most neutral sense, as a basic tool for advancing knowledge as a social enterprise. Moreover, while using the general ethos and particular aspects that Thomas Kuhn gave to the term, I am not attempting to invoke any of his specific arguments (at this time) or to open any interpretive fuss about his meanings. IConventionally, we understand paradigms to be those overly convenient and under-theorized terms that create the intellectual scaffolding for all sorts of other ideas. Eventually, however, people can notice some of the assistance provided by the paradigm and even suspect it of having an ideological function. From this perspective, to call something a paradigm is already to recognize it as a type of “black box” or “knot” of ideas operative in our discourse; this raises questions about why a paradigm may be so useful to a particular subject. I hope the irony of the situation is clear: paradigms are the building blocks for systems of knowledge until we actually perceive the degree to which we assume their support. At that point we fear that the linked imagery of the paradigm may constrain thought as much as facilitate it. Its efficacy is suddenly too apparent, so we are bound to inquire why we found this way of seeing things so constructive and whether we should rethink the model and possibly retire it—if we can.

To explore paradigms such as those constitutive of the idea religion is like unpacking a set of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, always another within the last one. It might also be compared to uncovering archeological strata that provide a picture of geological ages containing, perhaps, some of the detritus of human

PARADIGMS BEHIND (AND BEFORE) THE MODERN CONCEPT OF RELIGION

history, like the carbonation of ancient campfires or a fossilized set of footprints on an ancient lakeshore. It makes sense to imagine these paradigms as historical stages only if it is clearly understood that few facets are ever left behind. Even if the outermost cultural carapace of historical style is discarded, the associated ideas, both structured and structuring, can remain to hold most of a worldview in place. One easy example of this is the field of Religious Studies today: it is a tent so large that there are all sorts of sub-communities distinctly rooted in marginal paradigms of religions still able to thrive in the darker corners, often with their own journals, websites, and membership lists. While we may challenge the integrity of the edifice, even work to knock down some big sections of it, there are basements and rafters of suppositions with annexes of linked structures, all of which hold a great deal of the original paradigm together no matter how fully we attack it. Paradigms are nothing if not redundant.

Optimistically, tracing some of these boxes within boxes may suggest other major constructions and interpretations attending the way we study religion or simply how we talk about it. Most of the first part of this paper would be relatively uncontested by my colleagues, and some of my points are shortcuts through larger studies underway. Yet I will also try to suggest a style of inquiry consistent with the challenge of these paradigms, an approach that may redress the current sense of limited choices and directions in the study of religion. Certainly, I can provide examples of the difficulties of trying to undo a paradigm. The smaller models I have explored at length include traditional views of the uniqueness of ritual action, the cosmological medium of the text, and, currently, our cultural beliefs about beliefs. On the surface the latter may seem like a robust, free-for-all economy of ideas, but tensions and increasing rigidity are the current result, with little relation to traditional sources of authority or discernment. Hints of another paradigm lie in an attitude deeply ingrained within scholars in religious studies—and perhaps among historians of religion too—namely, the assumption that religion is fundamentally good, embodying the noblest of human ideals and distilled wisdom, if not sacred history and commands, despite the obvious human lapses everywhere. In terms of theory, the field of religious studies has not really moved much beyond such starting assumptions. Even if we have trendier reference points, deeply ingrained paradigms are still used to explain us to ourselves, enabling us to invoke a common pool of ideas about religion with few attempts to pull aside the curtain; this misleads this field and those such as history that make ample use of the insights of religious studies.

II. BOXES WITHIN BOXES

Christianity as the Prototype

It is necessary to choose a beginning, a first box, even though the choice may be ultimately arbitrary. I will start with the enduring paradigm created with the solidification of Christianity as the prototype for religion in general. The ascendance of Christianity in Europe—gradually spread by missionaries, travelers, and a variety of military and cultural colonizers—made it seem natural that Christianity be taken up in the European cultural milieu as the frame of reference for what
religion is. As the prototype for religion, Christianity provided all the assumptions with which people began to address historically and geographically different religious cultures. In other words, as the prototype for the general category of “religion,” an idea that itself needed to emerge, Christianity was the major tool used to encompass, understand, and dominate the multiplicity. Yet there is more to this prototype than any quick nod of understanding. The long and varied history of Christianity that naturally continues into our time has been subject to processes of dissemination and appropriation (or “inculturation,” to use church language) that from the very beginning created in turn a great many Christianities throughout the world. Many have long been lost to history, others seriously understudied, an example of how scholarship can aid the often cruel processes by which the early history of Christianity has appeared so much “neater” for 2,000 years than it actually was—or is. 4

Nonetheless, even as practiced by reservation Sioux, Russian Orthodox, or the Independent Churches of South Africa, the fact that so many peoples regard themselves as Christian means that, aside from its political and numerical dominance, the Christian prototype for “religion in general” to believers, non-believers, and scholars is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and not likely to change soon despite the tensions accruing in academic circles. Once, Chinese and Japanese informants would have denied having any religion because what they did have seemed totally unlike the model presented by Christian missionaries. 5

Today they might say they are Buddhist or Confucian, atheistic or involved in one the many “new” religions that have developed in Asia in the last fifty to one hundred years. 6 I had the opportunity to discuss the Christian prototype problem with a bright young religion scholar with a globalized personal background—native Taiwanese, Ph.D. from UCLA, seeking work in the USA, and an ordained minister in a fast-growing Buddhist Theravada sect known as Yi Fo Sheng—but he showed surprisingly little understanding or interest. Of course, he had no alternative terms or models that he could use within the standard scholarly language that determines admittance into the academic community, a version of English he had to work harder than most to master. However, further conversation revealed that he had probably absorbed the whole Christian paradigm through his sect’s nineteenth-century scholar-founder who explicitly strove to “modernize” Buddhism in so many ways that it became a distinct sect, better conforming to Western expectations. 7

The globalization of Christianity is beginning to get sustained scholarly attention. 8 An African was not elected pope in Rome this past spring, but the


6. Thanks to Jim Ketelaar for bringing to my attention the Japanese term shinkyo, devised in the nineteenth century to designate religion in general.

7. While maintaining the anonymity of my young colleague, I can say he was a member of Yi Fo Sheng and the Chi Jui Foundation, and was trained as a minister in the Sangha Council of Southern California.

8. For example, Philip Jenkins, The New Christendom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and the work of Lamin Sanneh, who has been writing on the topic for more than thirty years:
possibility was talked about. More substantively, the Church of England is dealing with a growing number of African and Asian Anglican churches joining the list of those threatening to withdraw from the international communion over the ordination of an openly gay American minister (the Nigeria communion has recently announced its withdrawal). As more Christianities are explored, the prototype may well be challenged in at least two general ways: by secular scholars from outside the normal definitions of the fold, but also by ministers from within, who are making decisions about what Christianity will be in the future—or more specifically, what Anglicanism, Methodism, Roman Catholicism, and new independent forms indebted only to their own selective appropriations will be.

In describing the historical rise of Christianity as prototype, one might rightly ask about Judaism and Islam, both notably active in European history even as Christianity was establishing its dominance. Yet even these early challenges to the development of the Christian prototype were effectively muted as each was given an early and consistent niche in the dominant Christian cosmology: Jews were quickly seen as misguided brothers due to their shared textual base and common roots (which failed to save them from the persecution of pogroms, but which have served as a historical warrant for them); they were essentially “refuseniks” who rejected the truth. Meanwhile Islam, the barbarians at the gate, were the threat that defined the very physical and psychological borders of Christendom. The differences among these three were, in fact, a type of proof to Christians of the distinctive Christ story: the eventual appreciation of the monotheistic and textual inheritances in which all three participated was taken as further proof that the Christian model could contain and explain religion more widely. That all three participated in rather different monotheistic and textual inheritances took Christians until the twentieth century to work out.

Religion as the Irrational

The Enlightenment is responsible for many congruent cultural shifts, but for my narrow purposes I will simply describe how it amended the previous idea of the Christian prototype of religion with a fully developed concept and terminology to form a more generic notion of “religion” in itself, namely, religion as the irrational. Up until the sixteenth century, as Samuel Preus nicely demonstrates, there was only the haziest notion of a general category of religion.9 Moreover, the only judgments as to rationality or irrationality, influenced by the discovery of “The Philosopher,” concerned Christianity in particular: Thomas Aquinas, for instance, argued that certain Christian mysteries, though not all, could not be determined by the use of reason and thus were the result of revelation.10 The work

---

10. See Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra
of a close contemporary, the putative author of the popular *Travels of Marco Polo* (1275–1292), was characteristic of the pre-Enlightenment Christianity ascendant in Europe. For Polo there were only four categories by which to classify and understand all the peoples he met, most of whom existed outside the structure of clear-cut states: a person was a Christian, Jew, Moor (Saracen), or a pagan. Polo’s travel memoirs constantly refer to the stereotypes associated with each, and seldom was he surprised by any non-stereotypical behavior, except for those pagans, the Chinese, who astonished him with their good manners, deep learning, and clearly observed social order. In fact, Polo is kindest toward pagans, noting many humanitarian aspects of their teaching and lives; he is brief on the Jews and unremittingly harsh on the Muslims—due in part, suggests Robert Latham, to the trade rivalry they presented to the bold new hopes of Europeans.

The Enlightenment’s separation of church and state, on top of Europe’s growing knowledge about and interaction with other religious cultures (for example, Jesuits writing home with their version of a rationalized Confucianism) aided the standardization of the term “religion” in popular parlance. Even though Christianity structured understanding of the notion of religion after itself, the term recognized, with excitement, that there were totally non-Christian religions out there. Of course, these foreign encounters led to debates in which the positive properties ascribed to the newly discovered religions, such as rational superiority or greater age in history, constantly alternated with evidence of their depravity. The Jesuits are particularly interesting to read for their unrelenting interpretive efforts to find in Confucianism what they felt just had to be there, some ancient evidence of the disclosure of the existence of God the Father and later the Son. Those who seized on such foreign examples to demonstrate the possibility of a rational religion (morality without metaphysics!), most famously Leibniz and Voltaire, were critiquing the Christian churches and working toward the separation of church and state. They and their predecessors were also attempting to maintain a natural option between the scientific realism that was the context

---


11. For arguments about whether Polo ever really reached China, see Frances Woods, *Did Marco Polo Ever Go to China?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996). Whether he went or not, the numerous reprinted and possibly expanded editions over the course of the next few centuries made his four stereotypes applicable, however clumsily, to the wider exotic world.

12. Polo quotes Kubilai, the Great Khan, as saying: “There are four great Prophets who are worshipped and to whom all the world does reverence. The Christians say that their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens Mahomet, the Jews Moses, and the idolaters Sakyamuni Burkhan who was the first to be represented as God in the form of an idol. And I do honour and reverence to all four, so that I may be sure of doing it to him who is greatest in heaven and truest; and to him I pray for aid.” For this quotation, and the wonderful discussion of the excellent manners of the Chinese “pagans” that Polo met, see *Marco Polo: The Travels*, transl. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin, 1958), 119, 160-161.

13. Ibid., 20-21; for one example, among many, of the cruel Saracens and the valiant Christians, see p. 305.

14. Preus, *Explaining Religion*, 17, demonstrates a growing European understanding of the inevitable relativism brought about by the diversity they were encountering, and the various ways the earliest thinkers responded to the interpretive challenge.

of their interest and traditional religious devotion (with powerful churches) that formed an object of criticism; some sort of “religion” was widely regarded as the necessary source of morality, needed to hold the rabble to the norms of social order. The emergence of Deism, a rationalized Christianity so important for the founders of the independent United States, is testimony to the difficulty in spanning this divide between rational and institutional piety, given the sheer amount of traditional Christianity that Deism had to jettison. It may be that Deism was the closest a Euro-American could come to atheism, an idea that was literally hard to think until Darwin’s theory of evolution provided another way of thinking, at the very least, about how it all began.16

As the empirical sciences developed sufficient social capital to turn their gaze on human history and social life, the paradigm of the rational in contrast to the irrational became an ideological tool with many uses. Not least, the objectification of religion in tandem with the expanding delineation of science created the environment for the earliest study of religion as religion. In a practical sense, religion became what science was not. The power of this dual objectification of religion and science eventually meant that as the irrational, religion was a natural object of study for the “sciences of man,” as developed by Vico, Hume, and Tylor, among others. Indeed, the interplay of the rational and irrational in definitions of the early sciences of religion led to some of the forms of comparative religion still practiced today: one particular line of scholars (comprised of the well-known figures of Max Müller, Sir James Frazer, and Mircea Eliade, among others) began to search for universals within the family of human religions, plural but clearly expressing an ultimately singular entity of a profound sort—the sacred.

The effort to identify universal patterns among the world’s religions had the potential to displace Christianity as the prototypical religion for comparative purposes, substituting as Ur religion. This project was continually floated, certainly by Müller, but the Ur categories were never convincingly foreign or unexpected. Most of the universalists do not seem to have imagined putting Christianity aside because they thought they had already done so. Instead of working on insuring that project, they tended to be lured by other visions, such as the taxonomy of gods that would prove a particular theory of development, an inventory of all the wisdom of the world, or even the disclosure of that “sacred” underlying the particular forms of human religious experience.

While not threatening the Christian prototype, the era that developed “irrational religion” did in fact introduce the means for a rudimentary egalitarianism and relativism when viewing the diversity of religions. If one group was alert to the unenlightened primitive still within Christianity, the other looked for the Christian mysteries hidden in the historical experience of the pagans; the quest to grasp the universals of religion was nothing less than the key to a timeless, if vaguely familiar, sacrality expressed in all religious manifestations, making religion of this vein the most fully shared form of human insight. Scholars today, notably the recently deceased but much quoted Roy Rappaport, still echo with confidence the idea that uncovering the dynamics of this sacrality would explain the emergence.

of humanness itself; although for Frazer and Eliade there were always hints that “the sacred” might be more ontological than phenomenological, for Rappaport it was clearly an evolutionary development.17

Within the paradigm of the Christian prototype—the foregoing search for universals behind the irrational wisdom of religion—scholars such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and his student Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1935), who followed romantic Hegelianism, argued as had many before them that Christianity was the fulfillment of history, although Troeltsch later modified his position: only in Western culture was Christianity truly “absolute.”18 Similarly, in the twentieth century, as the young Eliade began to devise a phenomenological approach to religion, he could still suggest that in Christianity one found the most logical and fulfilling development of the symbolism of the divine expressed in all preceding religions.19 Christianity as the perfection of the prototype found new ways to triumph even within the innovative context of religion as the irrational subject of rational scholars.

World Religions

The world religions paradigm has been so extraordinarily popular that it is certainly the way most Americans at least have come to see religion and religious multiplicity. Its popularity rests on many factors, primarily promotion by the discipline in order to solve the many problems of emphasis, logic, and cultural-centrism, when multiple religions are introduced. Even today it is still considered indispensable by many teachers in need of pedagogical tools for introducing students to a great deal of material in a manner that minimizes traditional suspicions and prejudices. Setting up a limited array of world religions—usually five to eight—can make the strange less strange; it can also invite effective questions about ideas and structures, the real fruits of comparison in any field.

Yet the paradigm always involves one major problem that readily generates resistance by some of the included traditions, namely, the “leveling” implied in making one’s religion just another in a group of comparable items. While many traditions today, and historically, are comfortable with this approach, some are not. Traditional Catholics, conservative Evangelicals, and conservative Sunni Muslims would certainly hesitate to include this formula in their own school curricula; indeed, some resent it completely—usually because of exclusivist claims. Yet another, more theoretical problem could also be part of their resistance: such formulations make each religion fit a gross simplification of the prototype in very neatly explicit ways just in order to display the fact that the religions are so similar in their basics that none of them can dominate or act as a prototype. The aura of comparable qualities is, of course, historically and theoretically misleading for each religion. Finally, what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they simply do not loom large enough in the world?

That they are confined to national entities and thus do not hold the promise of
generating a transnational community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype
used and so may not even technically qualify as religions after all?

These problems were painfully brought home to me, in an unexpected way, when
the theologian and dedicated spokesperson for a “global ethic,” Hans Küng, came
to speak at a conference on my campus, bringing with him his “World Religions—
Universal Peace—Global Ethic” exhibition, a series of large, handsome panels. Each panel identified an explicitly world religion, provided a distinctive symbol, posted a recognizable photograph of one of its holy places, and then simply listed a series of basic facts such as the founder (or rough equivalent), the main ideas or creeds, and ritual obligations. The overall effect was to demonstrate a fundamental
unity in the natural structure of these religions and, more specifically, a consensus
on the message of peace that is Professor Küng’s overriding concern at this point in his career. However, Küng’s panels were drawn into a totally unrelated lecture series sponsored by the “Local Religion, Global Relationships” project of the Religious Studies Department at Santa Clara, which studies the diversity of religious communities in Silicon Valley. The Project was having its first lecture series, in
which local religious leaders were invited to campus to speak for themselves
about their communities and how they dealt with the pluralism of the valley. The
opening reception, held prior to any of the lectures, was in the rotunda displaying
Küng’s World Religions panels. I was upset when I first heard about this collision of events, but then decided to make it useful, no matter how difficult: I would ask the local religious leaders just how they felt about the representation of their traditions by the panels and the leveling they imposed. Their surprising answers all tended to be along the lines of “no problem”; on the contrary, they were glad
to be represented there at all. The fact that Christianity was only one panel among
the six appeared to be a refreshing leveling to them and they found no significant fault with the information displayed. The “world religions” approach, according
to the Native American Indian shaman who spoke last in the series, could easily be seen as a victory given the ubiquitous dominance of Christianity, if one’s own
religion was included. I know their views were more than mere politeness since a
number of the formal presentations of their traditions could easily have been lifted
from Huston Smith’s ubiquitous pocket-size anthology, The Religions of Man.

So the popular and over-worked pedagogical view differs from the scholar’s eye-
rolling sense of the inadequacy of the world religions approach. The latter group,
however, has not done much to discuss the issue in print. In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell
Smith raised the problem of the inherently poor fit provided by the term “religion”
when applied to the premodern traditions of the East, a disrespect heightened by the West’s willingness to invent names (and jurisdictions) for these traditions.

20. The exhibit was sponsored by the Global Ethic Foundation in Tübingen. A descriptive brochure was published in 2000, translated by John Bowden, but the Foundation is the result of a programmatic book by Hans Küng entitled Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (New York: Crossroads Press, 1991). There are actually twelve panels but only six were shipped for this occasion.

that do not correspond at all well with how they identify themselves. Jonathan Z. Smith has addressed the history and classification difficulties of the term “world religions,” but the topic had to wait until 2005 and Tomoko Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions* for a full historical analysis of the European effects of the emergence of the paradigm. Masuzawa’s book will draw attention to this paradigm, forcing more self-consciousness in using it. Nonetheless, the textbooks on world religions continue to appear every other month, undoubtedly further efforts in a long line that have tried to unseat Huston Smith’s claim on the public and the junior college markets. In the wake of the Pluralism Project directed by Diana Eck, some are now making more use of the web or CDs. Some colleagues recently generated an introductory textbook, entitled *Global Religions*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer. Unfortunately, the textbook does not use the theme of globalization to introduce a critique of the world religions approach, which the book follows in a curtailed fashion. Rather it attempts to modify our traditional understanding of these religions as neatly associated with particular geographical locales. The chapters deftly complicate the histories with diasporas and transnational ways of living, some that have been endemic since the earliest days of a community. World religions, global religions: what’s in a name, we might ask? It may be possible that this book can begin to crack open some of the tenets of the world religions paradigm; but it seems more probable, given the introduction and the marketing, that the globalization vocabulary will merely update and further secure the world religions paradigm for another generation.

*The Cultural Necessity of Religion*

After the paradigms I have described as the Christian prototype, religion as irrational, and world religions, the fourth paradigm can seem unexpected, namely, the “cultural necessity of religion.” With the emergence of anthropological studies, usually dated to E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), the attempt to determine the origins of religion (either prehistorically or as part of a total scheme for human history) gave way to an analysis of religion’s *continuing* role in social life. In fact, the coexistence of (irrational) religious beliefs with scientific rationalism became a major question in its own right, one that further cemented the idea of “religion” as uniting all the major belief traditions, from the most ancient or primitive known to revealed Christianity and all the other more or less respectable but, from the point


25. Mark C. Juergensmeyer, *Global Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) states that the text is only “part of a larger project in which some sixty scholars have written on the diversity of religious traditions,” which is entitled, *A Handbook of Global Religions* (13).

26. Preus, *Explaining Religion*, xv-xvi. Preus’s strongly held thesis that (irrational) religion has effectively hidden a tradition of rational inquiry, threatening its existence, detracts from a very insightful and sensitive reading of the authors he discusses.
of view of many an early European Protestant scholar, still redemption-deprived “faiths.” Given the irrational religion paradigm continuing into an even more scientific age, these religions were put on the same page, so to speak, just as it came to be understood that all religion would probably fade under the influence of empirical knowledge. Yet the social sciences asked why people in great numbers were continuing to believe when they no longer needed to do so, thereby opening up many new perspectives.

Although the encounters forged by early anthropologists got started in painfully uneven ways, the results of which we continue to uncover to this day, their comparisons of “primitive” and “civilized” societies facilitated the realization of similarities in the practice of religion that began to answer questions about its continued role. Emile Durkheim hypothesized that religion was intrinsic to the construction of the social group; Franz Boas provided cultural evidence of many forms of shared humanity, especially in craft and myth; and Sigmund Freud described the formation of the modern inner self as embodying the childlike primitive, laboring under the onus of civilization. Each of these pathbreakers found their own rational, post-Enlightenment cultures to be built on fundamental—and socially crucial—irrationalities identifying a level of human experience shared with all manner of other populations. This diminishment of the distinctions that scholars saw among themselves, ancients, natives, and far-off exotics occurred in the age following Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). If a new unity was introduced, it also brought a new disunity between “that old-time religion” and the degrading theories of the over-intellectualized classes. Although some were pleased that Darwin’s theory vindicated the model of a single creation as suggested by the Bible instead of the racist theories of multiple creations used to support a natural ordering of human beings based on their color, it was a theory that otherwise appeared to divide as surely as did the issues of the American Civil War that preceded its dissemination.27 In Protestant America, Darwin brought science and Christianity to a fork in the road.

As the first truly secular paradigm, the cultural necessity of religion generated a distinctive divide within the social sciences between those with theological sympathies or affiliations and those who clearly foresaw any such loyalty to the non-scientific.28 Protestant anthropologists and sociologists had an easier time making their position clear than did divinity school scholars, who in an earlier stage of life had often been ordained clerics before slowly gravitating to the social study of religion. They were constantly accused of allowing the theological to degrade their analyses, although they were just as likely to hold to the universalistic assumptions still so important to the social sciences in general as to lingering theological ones. Yet scholars of religion in divinity schools who founded non-theological programs of studies—that is, *Religionswissenschaft* or history of religions, one of the major venues for the study of religion today—used the secular paradigm to create gray

---

27. Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club* presents a fine, extended argument concerning the interaction of religion with the racial ramifications of these two pre-Darwinian scientific theories.

28. This was arguably the first period in Euro-American history when atheism could be a rational position. Darwin’s theory provided a biological explanation of life that could displace or rival that of the Book of Genesis, the lack of which had always kept many a scientific rationalist a quasi-biblicalist with regard to the origin of life and the universe.
areas in which the social-scientific approach and both church history and theology influenced each other, creating something that differed from either extreme. This would prove to be one angle among many from which the division between rational minds and the irrational cultures they were describing seemed less clear the more it was probed. Still, popular society was in love with the story of the cold scientist, male or female, whom the movies obliged to fall in love with an irrational or maddeningly unconventional kook. Just as often a fatherly old scientist would embody both extremes, rational and unexpectedly irrational, to the point of giving good advice about love. By this time, life imitated art as moviegoers had become aware of the theories of the scientist of the age. Grandfatherly Einstein, father of atomic energy and critic of the bomb, mathematical genius of relativity and quantum mechanics, represented yet another “marriage” of the rational and irrational in the only terms that the twentieth century allowed.

The model of religion as a universal, indispensable, and non-rational social creation would be used by Religious Studies scholars for decades. Even the world religions paradigm was made to fit into it as well as support it. A category for the “other” primitive religions of anthropological studies was already tacked on. The leveling equality of the “world religions” model, in addition to the social-scientific “evidence” for religion as a significant marker for shared social qualities of humanity across all races and societies, certainly underscored the importance of religion in discussions of the “family of man.” But these new humanisms came at some cost. Religion was a new sociocultural bond among the peoples of the world, and an expectation if not ongoing necessity for social life, only insofar as its irrationality was most pronounced. Indeed, the sciences and emerging social sciences found in religion all the irrationalities that they were intent to overcome. Aquinas’s tendency to grant the co-existence of the rational (science) and the irrational (religion) was still reflected in many Enlightenment theorists; however, this view had given way to the dominance of science and the humanistic belief in its role in freeing human beings from various forms of enslavement (such as described by Durkheim, Freud, Marx, and Spencer). This was the clearest language in which religion succumbs to history. All of these thinkers wondered how society would fare in this new mode, if it could survive at all, and many had inklings of pseudo-religions on the horizon—nationalism, industrialization, individualism, and free-market capitalism, for example. The “cultural necessity of religion,” which would signify for many the moderating effects of religious values on the moralities of secular humanism, in the end haphazardly reinforced fears of these other irrationalities. Yet at the same time, it delayed pronouncements of the demise of the irrational. Certainly the events of the twentieth century helped to kill off many sacred cows—secular, religious, rational, and irrational.

*Religion as a Western Construct*

The last paradigm needing identification here is the current claim that religion is a Western construct. The discourse of the postmodern critique, within which this paradigm was generated, emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century by developing a simple logic long operative within a number of fields. Boas’s notion of culture alone contains all the sticky seeds needed to germinate this
perplexed and perplexing perspective. For example, if all people are embedded within cultures and inevitably see other cultures through the lens of their own, then it stands to reason that scholars cannot see other cultures without the biases, both conscious and unconscious, that their cultural lenses inevitably confer on other people’s reality. This insight enabled religion scholars for the first time to see and explore aspects of the Christian prototype at work shaping Religious Studies. For decades they had simply focused on accusations of the influence of Christian theology on their more historical and sociological efforts, and worked to expunge clearly theological tendencies. The religion-as-irrational paradigm, built by a long line of “natural” oppositions, was the first to begin to stumble. Yet so many other avenues and dilemmas opened up in the last decades of the twentieth century that exploration of the prototypical role given to Christianity was not pursued with any sustained energy or direction. Rather, the field developed a stream of work particularly preoccupied with deconstructing the idea of religion as universal and sui generis, suppositions behind the comparative world religions paradigm as well as the earlier ones, of course. Feminist critical theory developed strong historical arguments and greater institutional influence. Most significantly, Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) introduced another level of analysis by highlighting the misreadings (some linking colonization to the conferral of feminine and irrational qualities on the colonized) that had made scholarly analysis blissfully unaware of its role in maintaining cultural biases that, in turn, kept communities defenseless against the political encroachment of more powerful political entities with their equally powerful, and confident, sense of reality.

Said’s work stopped some professors in their tracks. Others required a shift in the overall Zeitgeist to understand the argument and its significance. Orientalism was soon complemented by a plethora of narrow and broad studies addressing the body, sexuality, notions of the soul, rationality, and the place of women, and even the church, in the rise of scientific culture—in other words, scholars of religion began to read widely and together with other disciplines explored many of the assumptions that had helped to support the oldest paradigms for so long. Said also, if indirectly, provoked greater sensitivity to the assumptions of traditional academic research, such as the belief that there was no need to hear from those people, the “others” of their research, affected by the assumptions and ultimately by the studies. As the past became less familiar territory to more than just historians, and other cultures were no longer so quietly accessible to analysis, various critiques of the culture of science made even the bedrock of institutionalized rationality shift a bit. Some religionists tried to save the idea of the religious as universal by more fully subordinating it within culture; but the concept of culture had its own deconstructive critiques to try to survive. This period is, of course, familiar ground to readers, but the way it has been weathered by scholars of religion is still

29. The most consistent example of this critique is Donald Wiebe, as in his The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflicts with Theology in the Academy (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).
being assessed; indeed, while the concepts that have fallen and hit the ground are fairly easy to notice, it is too soon to come to any conclusion about exactly what is left standing. Yet some disciplinary history is clear.

Early and particularly humorous revelations of bias were the examples of Protestantism displayed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarly studies, particularly of ancient scriptural traditions whose modern manifestations were disdainfully dismissed as Catholic-like corruptions. Donald Lopez describes the story of the Pali text society’s search for the earliest, and purest, Buddhism with skill and verve; yet before him, Mary Douglas, and later, Jonathan Z. Smith were struck by the clearly Protestant (and, therefore, anti-Catholic) bias they were finding in quite different scholarly materials. Still, as noted above, the main target of the deconstructive imagination was the field itself, identified with one or two ideas, but never identified by the full set of paradigms I have provided here. Titles such as The Ideology of Religious Studies, Manufacturing Religion, and The Western Construction of Religion testify to a healthy round of critical studies that have made the field much more aware of its complex historiography. However, the titles of these books bark louder than their arguments actually bite. The most extreme position, swallowed by many a religion writer with an audible gulp, was defined early on by Jonathan Z. Smith when he wrote, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” While waved as a banner by later proponents of critical studies, Smith’s assertion has not been clearly analyzed or challenged to date. One wonders, for example, what the vigorous section of the American population lobbying for religious causes would make of such a statement. Indeed, Smith’s understanding of “religion” may even underestimate how quickly such a term, passing out of the scholar’s window, is drawn upon in real encounters of all kinds in a variety of borderlands: travel writers composing texts of the distant and exotic; missionaries trying to explain their cultural communication problems to the “boards” back home who want news of converts; as well as the many dictionary projects that began soon after the first attempts by missionaries and anthropologists alike to engage indigenous communities in talk of their beliefs. No matter how it was created, the idea of religion was reified in line with the Christian prototype of a set of beliefs about God and quickly supplied a variety of needs arising from the


35. For examples of the use of the term during Columbus’s encounters in the New World, see Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); in the arguments of Bartolomé de las Casas (do the natives have a religion to be respected, or none so they are ready for conversion?), see Witness: Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, ed. George Sanderlin [1971] (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). The Oxford English Dictionary identifies “religion” with thirteenth-century uses in regard to holy orders or persons.
cultural diversity encountered, such as the need to speak to others and of them in terms more complex than simply “the saved” and “the rest.”

Smith also underestimates the extensive influence of the term today. Many Muslims and Buddhists would currently be hard pressed to think of their “religions” without the categories that we might trace back to a Christian prototype and experiences of Euro-American intrusion. Indeed, defining cultural practices as religion (or vice versa) has had the unexpected result in America of protecting them by putting them on an equalizing footing under the law alongside Christianity and other world religions. Oglala Sioux or Inuit fishing communities will still talk about their cultural identity in terms other than religious, such as a way of life that has come down to them from their ancestors and not just a set of beliefs; but then many of them were forced to convert to Christianity and the distinction between their religion and their culture is a solution allowing them to maintain the latter and acknowledge the realities of the former. 36

In this way the postmodern critique of modernism facilitated numerous inquiries into assumptions that formed the Christian prototype for religion in general, adding to more long-standing questions about the comparative aspects of the “world religions” paradigm and providing the context for debates that have destabilized the notion that scientific truth determined the rational and irrational. The latter debates left both sides of the Enlightenment dichotomy of science and religion as historical constructions that do not always, and have not always, fit the circumstances with which scholars understood themselves to be dealing. Yet Said’s demonstration of the construction of bodies of knowledge used by Western powers for agendas that spoke to cultural progress and political domination on the one hand, and spoke for the colonized as their best hope for all the benefits of Western civilization on the other (salvation then, trade now?), inevitably led to a reflexive habit: is Said’s picture of the power of European discourse about the Orient, disorienting as it originally was, just a bit too empowering in its description of effective agency? What continuities does this black box have with the others identified above? Said’s study is old enough that a developed critique of it has moved the conversation into more parsed realities than this essay has any business enumerating. The ruckus over globalization—for, against, reality, mirage, historically “old hat,” and so on—shows how difficult it will be to avoid metanarratives in which the interests of a dominant culture are projected as reality, as the future, as the excellent outcome for all who cooperate—or the cause of unprecedented poverty and even environmental degradation.

Even a short stretch of service in the scholarly professions today is sufficient to teach one that today’s corrections (one would have written “truth” twenty-five years ago) are tomorrow’s examples of shortsightedness. Compare the literature that began about twenty years ago on the scholar’s obligation with regard to the cultural products of colonized and conquered peoples. It was clear that a thoughtful person could not encourage the destructive vandalism of archeological sites by buying a truly old museum-quality pot from the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico.

Yet in a recent essay, Kwame Anthony Appiah, reflecting on the “cultural patrimony” of his native Ghana, makes a much more nuanced argument for repatriation when goods are looted from people with known names and clear cultural links, but he also analyzes the validity of “the British Museum’s claim to be repository of the heritage not of Britain but of the world.” That view strikes him as “exactly right;” indeed, Appiah would be more comfortable with the artifacts’ continued residence there if the treasures of a vanished civilization are indeed shared more widely. Of course, the deadly details will be in those arguments about whether a culture has truly vanished or has continued in some form.

It is not clear where the study of religion is going, as so many new books are quick to say, but the choices have always appeared limited. The field might define “religion” in a narrow manner, reflecting either strict specifics of content or style of practice (belief in a supernatural being, which is quite true for all systems of religious-like practice) or historical criteria suitin its emergence in the Christian-dominated world of late-medieval Europe (related to being bound by vows, according to thirteenth-century sources). Or it may suppose a universality that could never be proven, but posit an open “family of resemblances” with which to describe the commonalities. Scholars may abandon the term as a historical artifact and place analytic weight on “culture” or “tradition,” hoping they can do the job. As a fourth alternative, they might agree that the European roots of the notion of religion have been transcended by cultural contacts that have spread the concept and encouraged a rapidly varying set of nuances in how, why, and when it is used.

There is, however, yet another option; it is a real one facing the field, even if it is currently hard to make sense of. Generated by a diverse set of voices, almost all emanating from the sciences, sociology to neurology, there is fresh mobilization to cast “religion” as a universal, adaptive, cognitive property in the history of the human race. With a seductive confidence in the certainty of their claims and frequently embarrassing naiveté as to what has been said in a century of social analysis, this broad line of theorizing has enough new science at its disposal to be more than a curious diversion, but much less than a developed, paradigmatic view. Aside from a small group of rational-choice theorists, represented by Rodney Stark, the influence of the anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s wordy study of ritual, and a few books by Ilkka Pyssiäinen, who is disappointed in his training in theology and comparative religion, there is one group of cognitive theorists who see themselves as indebted to Pascal Boyer, and another group who see themselves as more broadly revising the social sciences, represented well if not solely by Stephen Turner.


The rational-choice and Boyer cognitive theorists are apt to claim “finally” to put the study of religion on a scientific footing, with each heralding a new naturalism or taking credit for a “new science” of religion. These scholars intend to address religion in a more disciplined manner (than whom?) using the newer (really newer?) tools of economic or cognitive precision. Yet so far the confidence of both rational-choice and cognitive theory has rested in great part on a total reluctance to address any definitions beyond the most self-evident—and self-serving—ones. The referents for religion, capital, and piety, for example, are all clear-cut and unexamined—as is the method’s location in any ideological paradigm. They distinguish themselves with small modifications of their definition of religion as belief in supernatural beings, superhuman agency, or counter-intuitiveness. The works of David Wilson Sloan and Scott Atran appear to engage in little of the ideological shadow-boxing with traditional scholars of religion that mars the work of those who follow in Boyer’s footsteps. With exceptions here and there, the more enthusiastic scientists tend to ignore previous classics in the study of religion, ready to start out fresh with what they do—evolutionary biology or neurology, cognitive psychology, and so on.

In general, as this fresh mobilization of science wrests the study of religion from its traditional handlers, most of those handlers have themselves moved on, notably with work on social memory as developed by Paul Connerton and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, as well as the social ramifications of agency or cognitive programming on religious experience as seen in studies by Ann Taves, and by Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson. Using practice and performance theory, others have focused less on the mental states long thought to define religion and more on its creative activities. All of these groups have opened up just some of the most identifiable fronts in the study of religion. It is an open question to what extent they will avoid some of the knots that have defined that study for so long. Avowed atheism or scientific precision is certainly not going to do it. In too many of these theorists, there is a palpable eagerness to overcome the pesky challenges of the postmodernist paradigm’s view of the Western construction of religion. Thus, the new fronts in religion may turn out to be very familiar.

III. TILTING AT PARADIGMS

In one form or another, the five paradigms described above are constants in the discipline of History as well as in Religious Studies. They demonstrate the staying power of major models over centuries, the type of resiliency that has created fields of study, absorbed repeated challenges, and stubbornly resisted


abandonment. Feuerbach, that nineteenth-century theologian-turned-Hegelian-turne

d-philosophical anthropologist of religion, put it with a simplicity that

Marx would echo: “man does not dominate his fundamental conception of the

world; on the contrary, it is it that dominates him, animates him, determines, and
govens him.” 41 We do not have ideas about the world so much as they have us.

But Feuerbach’s nineteenth-century pessimism eventually gave way to twentieth-
century confidence that if we cannot change things we can imagine them in our

own image, as far from static. Fundamental conceptions may absorb repeated

challenges, but they evolve more regularly to avoid such challenges.

So how does one deal with the paradigms I have isolated? The process of going

from a paradigm important to the discipline to a problematic way of thinking that

should be left behind (no parallel to the career span of a professor intended!) is

not encouraged by Feuerbach or even Kuhn. Kuhn’s analysis of the replacement

of scientific paradigms may not be completely descriptive of the more diverse

methods and interests of the humanities and social sciences, but I do not think it

seriously misleads. In brief, he argued that an old paradigm is not an old para-
digm until there is a new one to replace it, one that already has substantial sup-
port. People do not throw out a way of thinking to leave themselves dependent on

one person’s method; they certainly will do nothing to make their own previous

work suddenly retrograde. A challenge to an aging paradigm will be viewed as

something more promising than tilting at windmills only if it offers a clearly

developed alternative way of thinking already constructively productive for more

than a few. And that would only be the beginning: whoever started the paradigm
topping would probably not recognize, or enjoy, the working result.

It might be interesting to illustrate the difficulties of challenging a paradigm

with a personal example. My projects on ritual, textuality, and, most recently,

belief, are not a set of integrated arguments, but they are analogous examples of

engagements with reigning assumptions and they present some amusing lessons.

My work on ritual is my most complete challenge since it even included an

attempt at a constructive alternative. I tried to dismantle the nineteenth-century

construction of ritual as a universal phenomenon, considered utterly distinct in

its structural mode of action and, inevitably distinct on all of our unexamined

assumptions about thought and action. I wrote two books on the topic before I

realized that there was a deeper, core paradigm shaping the notion of ritual that

made my study into a set of wooden arrows bouncing harmlessly off a steel tank,

namely, the idea of sacrifice. 42 Sacrifice is the endlessly mystifying act of vio-

lence at the heart of religion (especially with Christianity as the model) and, in

theory, the fount of all other modes of ritual action, such as initiation, offerings,

prayers, and sacred dramas. Not realizing that sacrifice was the thread to pull, I

simply addressed it in passing to avoid giving it the traditional degree of atten-

tion. Intent on challenging the basic assumption of the uniqueness of ritual, I took


of recent trends, see s.v. Ritual (Further Considerations), Encyclopedia of Religion, v. 11 (2005), 7848-7856.
the contrary view—analyzing ritual activities as fully within the context of all other forms of social action. If ritual is not a uniquely different way of acting, that is, one lacking a particular universal structure, then the questions shift to what is the difference between ritual and other ways of acting and, very key to my mind, when and why would people decide to do ritual acts instead of something else? I depicted ritual as one type of social praxis, namely, “practices of ritualization,” and even used a “control,” so to speak, by comparing a ritual way of acting to “theorizing” as yet another type of social action. In the end, this all meant that I defined general characteristic principles of practice, and then explored how ritual distinctly played with these principles (as did theorizing). I emerged with examples of how people effectively ritualize a set of otherwise normal actions and explain why that can be a strategic way of acting in particular types of situations. In addition, I tried to account for the mythic view of “unchanging” tradition (which is the preferred focus or context for most ritualizing) as well as all the many ad hoc ritual activities—religious, civic, and familial—that people consciously and unconsciously deploy in their lives.

 Needless to say, I was not successful in single-handedly providing a new understanding of sacrifice. The attraction of the concept may be hard to convey, but it crops up in some widely popular form almost every decade. My career alone has seen three sacrifice fads. There recently was René Girard’s psycho-theological theory of the murdered scapegoat, and a decade and a half before him Georges Bataille’s notion that the profane, when taken to transgressive extremes such as sacrificial killing (or self-mutilation), mystically transforms itself into an experience of the sacred. On the basis of those ideas alone, I should have gone back to take on sacrifice explicitly. The concept is certainly relevant in public religious and political life, for example, the ritualization of terrorism in orchestrated acts by which Palestinian “sons” are sacrificed, instead of the ram, in acts of terrorism against Jews. The ritual can be seen as an attempt to sacralize the political struggle for “the land” in a manner that undermines the sacralization claimed by Jewish settlers and, indeed, the government of Israel.

 Meanwhile, in a third style, studies of sacrifice as the classic example of unique ritual action continue to be written. Inviting me to contribute to a prestigious anthology of terminology, the editors gave me the topic of “performance,” and included “sacrifice” but left ritual out altogether. The recent vogue is exemplified by Roy Rappaport in a lengthy volume that describes ritual as “the social act basic to humanity,” the act that at the dawn of human history, and even today, socializes the merely human into true humanity. This formulation has begun to appear in many popular forms. Surprisingly, Robert Bellah has given


an exceptional show of support for Rappaport’s nearly mystical and ultimately apocalyptic paean to the power of ritual. His defense of Rappaport is eventually followed by a critique of my analysis of “ritualizing” as fundamentally nihilistic, as if I were denying the existence of real acts of ritual simply by challenging the idea of a uniquely-structured entity behind the name. 46 Ritual (sacrifice), as the cornerstone of human evolutionary adaptation, will be around for a while as a trendier version of the previous ideas.

Overall, therefore, I am not impressed with any ground gained in my first extended bout with a paradigm. I have learned to take scholars’ romanticism of ideas much more seriously; my understanding of theorizing is leading, I hope, to a fuller analysis. However, I also tried to explore the shape of a paradigm in a project on the nature of textuality in China. I saw textuality as invoking distinct cosmological structures, although the focus on Chinese texts was due to my own love of their aesthetic materiality, as well as the conviction, now commonplace, that the particular form of written language would generate a different text-supporting cosmos than that of the European Bible. 47 In the historical saga of the latter, one of the main themes is the story of how writing conquers orality, priests defeat the prophets, and the messiah dies to live on in the Reformation Biblical text. In Chinese history, an early divinatory cosmos and spoken words of the masters become bound in commentary until new sources of texts were found in new layers of the cosmos, an imaginative development that followed the introduction of Buddhism. Printing affected both Europe and China quite differently at first, but more similarly over time. What is the significance in all this, I wondered, for the medium, the message, the power structure, and competition of cosmological visions? An account of the religious text in China would show up the influence of a paradigm about the Biblical cosmos and its effect on the nature and authority of texts even into the modern era—that is, through the Reformation, which made the text everything and in the process gave birth to the sciences of textual analysis. This cultural paradigm involves a tension between the sacred and the analyzed text, and maybe we have resolved this tension in modern cultural studies. We also cling to a master narrative in which the history of writing and printing in Europe is basically taken to describe how it happens elsewhere. This narrative led Benedict Anderson to remark: “I was startled to discover, in many notices of Imagined Communities, that this Eurocentric provincialism remained quite undisturbed.” 48 I am not surprised at all.

Santa Clara University
