Chapter I

Introduction: Religion and the Human Adventure BeyondLimits and Boundaries

In our work and in our lives we all try to extend our consciousness to a level beyond the everyday. This transcendence is necessary part of our worldview formation and maintenance. It relieves the everyday of its monotony and creates a world that is not seen but believed in as an aura that permeates the everyday and makes difficulties easier to bear. As a result, people believe in superhuman entity/entities that power the world, the universe and all the beings in it. This relationship between the two is what we call religion.

Religion is an imperative part of our society. Long before the term religion came into existence; it was an integrated part of human self and society. Amongst anthropologists, the documentation of religion begins during the 19th century. The eternal quest for the unseen, the omnipresent, and the supernatural attracted the attention of many scholars.

Religion lays the foundation of any society; it is important for the appropriate functioning of the society. Time and situation has enabled it to mould itself according to individual and social needs. An individual becomes a part of a religious group without his prior consent, approval, and knowledge. It affects the life of every individual living on this earth without his knowledge; irrespective of his religious beliefs i.e. theist or atheist. The definitions pertaining to religion, like - morals, norms, values, sanctions, etc., are defined by leaders of the society. These are strongly ingrained in the child as religious discourse even before he starts differentiating between the ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’. These discourses are enculturated subconsciously and stay with the individual till death and they are adhered to strongly. These morals affect the everyday life of any individual, their actions, decisions, assessment of life, and definition of life – the world revolves around this philosophy.
In my work I have explored the effect of religion in the everyday life of an individual and its impact on the structure and function of society. I went through the work done by various anthropologists on religion, the definitions given from different perspective and contexts. Later on I have given brief of religion of community I have explored during the research. This part of the thesis talks about the history of Parsis and their religion. It gives the ‘Book’ perspective of Zoroastrian religion to the reader, i.e. the way it is preached to the layman, they importance of rituals and daily practices Parsis are supposed to observe in day-to-day life. After I have discussed previous works done by various scholars on Parsis, on the basis of which I have laid down the objective of this study, I have given ethnography of Parsis. This ethnography mainly focuses on religious beliefs and practices of Parsis. The analysis of the ethnography is done using ‘Social Construction of Reality’ by Lurkmann and Berger. At the end of the analysis I have commented on the theories of religion, which I have discussed in this introduction.

This introduction consists of brief history of religion and theoretical definitions of religion given by various scholars. These definitions are distinguished based on their perspective and context into sociological, psychological, substantive, functional and Verstehende and Formal definitions.

**History of Religion**

Anthropologists speak in terms of universal institutions found in all societies. They are kinship, family, marriage, polity, law, economy, and religion. Each institution has its own organizing principles by which it is identified. All these institutions do not exist independently of each other; put together they form a complex called culture. Religion is one of the mystic parts of culture and is universal. It is found even in those societies which have tried to demolish certain kinds of religion. As Durkheim’s theory said, there may not be a concept of deity, but there is always a concept of the sacred and the profane (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 53-71). Religion is understood as a relation between human beings and the so-called supra-empirical powers. The underlying belief is that all societies have some concept of a diffused or specific entity beyond the domain of logico-mathematical order.
Religion may be described as a system of beliefs and practices directed towards the “ultimate concern” of a society. “Ultimate Concern”, a concept used by Paul Tillich, has two aspects – meaning and power. It has meaning in the sense of ultimate meaning of the central values of the society and it has power in the sense of ultimate, sacred, or supernatural power which stands behind those values.

Viewed in this way, religion is concerned with the explanation and expression of the ultimate values of the society; in other words, it has important integrative functions for groups and for individual personalities. At the same time, religion is concerned with the threat of these central values, or to social or individual existence; it has important defense functions in providing ways of managing tensions and anxieties. Religion both maintains the ultimate values of a society and manages tensions in the personalities of individual members of a society. The religious beliefs and practices which provide the double-barreled function are of course, infinitely varied from culture to culture, and are developed and tailored with symbols, myths, and rituals that fit the varying cultural contexts. The basic functions and the concept of an “Ultimate Concern” with meaning and power are probably found universally in human societies (Lessa and Vogt; 1958: 1).

Whenever religion is discussed it refers to something spiritual – a divine presence, symbol, principle, or idea which influences or endeavors to influence, human social life and people’s inner strength and emotions, whether through their behavior or through their relations with other societies. Such religion imparts the strength of the human society in which its adherents live.

It develops from such a definition that any religion which does not express itself institutionally – does not demand action or a certain conduct, or restrained from a certain conduct or behavior, and exerts no influence on the world or on the quality of societal life – cannot be recognized as religion. In the same way, any organized human activity designed to advance some principle or idea which does not extend beyond a limited intellectual circle devoid of influence on the world of actions and values, or the worldview of a specific thinker in raw or published form, is excluded from the definition of religion. On the other hand, any faith which includes belief in some deity, spirit, totem, or image and expresses itself through rites and rituals and/or requires conformity to a
certain code of behavior is considered a religion. Communism, for example, which constitutes itself as a political movement in opposition to and/or infiltration of the ruling power, or establishes itself as a ruling government in its own right falls into the category of religion. Likewise, to the extent that such ideas as democracy, conservatism, liberalism, anarchism, atheism, natural living, modesty, family purity, and abortion rights lead people to a communal activity or to the prevention of such, are also considered to be religious (Cohen; 2003: 2-3).

The writings on religion in the 19th century were concerned with the basic question of how various forms of religion originated in human history. The emphasis shifted in the 20th century to the basic question of what functions religion has in human society. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Homans, Parsons, and Firth have established landmarks in the development of functional thinking about the nature of religion and associated beliefs and practices. According to Malinowski, religious beliefs consists in the traditional standardization of the positive side in the mental conflict and, therefore, satisfies a definite individual need arising out of the psychological concomitants of social organization. On the other hand, religious belief and ritual, by making the critical acts and social contacts of human life public, traditionally standardized, and subject to supernatural sanctions, strengthen the bonds of human cohesion. Religion in its ethics sanctifies human life and conduct and becomes the most powerful force of social control. In this way it satisfies the primary needs of humans (Lessa and Vogt; 1958: 99).

The functions of religion given by Radcliffe-Brown, Durkheim and others include the fact, that it helps in regulation, maintenance, transmission of sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends. It expresses social existence of symbolic patterns. Religious rites reaffirm solidarity and enforce social action (Lessa and Vogt; 1958: 129).

It is in this context that this study is being conducted on certain aspects of religion. The origin of religion can only be speculated upon; they can never be discovered (Lessa and Vogt; 1953: 9). Prior to the 19th century, the work on religion was characterized by four features: the world’s dominant religions; studies which were ethnographic; questions and arguments which were philosophical and a concern for absolute truth.
After the 19th century, British and French scholars began to make an impact. The period was marked by technological, social, and intellectual changes. Considerable information was also collected from those parts of the world which were so far untouched by earlier travelers. Thereafter, various theories and concepts were given by many scholars on religion.

Different definitions on religion were proposed by different scholars belonging to different fields. Some of the definitions were phenomenological, trying to state what is common to all the acknowledged forms of religion; for example, religion is, “human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or Gods entitled to obedience and worship”. Others were interpretative. These were sociological, psychological, naturalistic, sympathetic, etc., but such definitions stipulate. They decide how the term is to be used and impose this in the form of a definition. Perhaps the more realistic view is that the word “religion” does not have a single meaning but consists of different phenomena subsumed within it.

One of the first scientific efforts to examine the relationship between religion and society was done by Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 AD). According to him, religion is a social phenomenon established through solidarity and usually born among groups with social solidarity. Once the religion is adopted and supported by such a group, it becomes a highly effective force. It creates a new loyalty: absolute belief in divine law and obedience to the religious leader. This relationship between religion and societal solidarity is best seen as a dialectical one (Guindi; 1977: 5-7).

The real anthropological quest for religion started with the work of John Lubbock (1834-1913 AD), he attempted to combine archeological evidence of simple people, on the one hand, and anthropological evidence, on the other. In his book, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, he outlined an evolutionary scheme, beginning with atheism, continuing with fetishism, nature worship, and totemism, shamanism, anthropomorphism, monotheism and, ethical monotheism (Smart; 2002: 514).
Theories of Religion

After Lubbock many philosophers worked on religion and defined religion in terms of, Psychological theories, Sociological theories, Substantive Definitions, Functional Definitions, *Verstehende* Definitions and Formal Definitions, which are discussed hereunder:

Psychological Theories

The first psychological theory of religion was given by E. B. Tylor (1871). He gave the theory of animism, stressing on the idea of ‘soul’ rather than ‘ghost’ (which was given by Sir Herber: Spencer). Creatures as well as inanimate objects have life and personality and souls. ‘Primitive’ man’s reflection on such experiences as death, disease, trances, vision and, above all, dreams lead him to the conclusion that they are to be accounted for by the presence or absence of some immaterial entity, the soul. Then he gave the evolution of religion, from animism to polytheism to monotheism. According to him, religion is a rational attempt on the part of humans to interpret mysterious phenomena (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 24-30).

Max Müller (1878) said that man had always the intuition of divine, the idea of the infinite deriving from sensory experiences. All human knowledge comes through senses. Things which are intangible like the sun and the sky gave men the idea of the infinite and also furnished the material for deities. Once the idea of the infinite has arisen, it could only be thought of in metaphor and symbol, which was taken from what, seemed majestic in the known world, but these attributes lost their original metaphorical sense and achieved autonomy by becoming personified as deities. The only way we can discover the meaning of religion is by etymological research. He deals with belief in the human soul (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 20-23).

William James (1890) holds that self-interest and desire lie at the roots of man’s belief. When circumstances exist where man does not succeed in reaching knowledge through ‘terrestrial’ means he activates his desire so that he can communicate on the level of supernatural intuition, communicating with transcendental objects that rise above human
reality. Through experiencing revelation, man reaches out to his God who, in turn, exposes him to worlds and knowledge that cannot be asserted through natural means (Cohen; 2003: 458). Religion is the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.

Andrew Lang (1898) was an animist – he agreed with the belief in souls. He found that the concept of God was found among simpler societies. God is a spirit and those who worship him must do so in spirit or in truth. The soul, ghost, and God have different sources and monotheism may have preceded animism (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 32).

Wilhelm Wundt (1906) said that first comes a belief in magic and demons, then in the totemic age we have the beginning of religion. As totemism fades, the clan is replaced by human ancestors. Ancestor worship then leads to a hero cult, and then the cult of Gods. The final stage is the humanistic age with its universalism (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 37-38).

R. R. Marett (1909) said it was not ideas which give rise to action, but actions gave rise to ideas. The pre-animistic stage of religion cannot be differentiated from magic. He called religion-magic as *mana*. Primitive people have a feeling that there is an occult power in certain persons and things and it is the presence and absence of this feeling which cuts off the sacred from the profane, it being the function of taboos to separate one world from the other; and this feeling is the emotion of awe, composed of fear, wonder, admiration, interest and respect. Whatever evokes this emotion is treated as a mystery is religion. At this stage, magic cannot be differentiated from religion (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 32-35).

Sigmund Freud (1913), on his theory of the Oedipus Complex said that religion is an illusion. It arose and is maintained by feelings of guilt and obligation to obey the behests of the deity. Religion is a mental defense against the more threatening aspects of nature (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 42-43).

According to James Frazer (1922) mankind passes through three stages of intellectual development, from magic to religion to science. Psychologically science and magic are alike, though one happens to be ‘false’ and the other ‘true’ (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 27-
30. Religion, then, is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of Nature and of human life.

R. H. Lowie (1925) said that ‘primitive’ religion is characterized by the sense of the extraordinary, mysterious, or supernatural and the religious response is that of amazement and awe. There are no specific religious behaviors, but only religious feelings. Therefore, a belief in the dead is not religious because there is no emotion attached to it and the flag of one’s country is a religious symbol (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 38).

Wilhelm Schmidt (1931) says that the idea of ghosts and spirits are too sophisticated for rude men, everything develops from something simpler and cruder. There must be an early stage than animism, the stage of mana, in which the ideas of luck, canny and uncanny, were the role constituents of the supernal. Mana existing in objects and events was an intrinsic property. Hence, arose the doctrine of spells and charms, and a stage of magic came into being. Through errors of judgments and faulty reasoning about dreams arose the idea of ghosts and finally the idea of spirits and Gods (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 31-32).

Paul Radin (1932) said that the acquisition of rights and belief precedes the emotions, which accompany individuals in later life. He learns to participate in them before he feels any emotion. A rite is part of the culture, the individual is born into it, and it imposes itself on him from outside like the rest of his culture. It is the creation of society, not of individual reasoning or emotion, though they may satisfy both (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 46).

M. Hill (1973) uses the super-empirical approach, “The set of beliefs which postulate and seek to regulate the distinction between an empirical reality and a related and significant super-empirical segment of reality; the language and symbols which are used in relation to this distinction, and activities and institutions which are concerned with its regulation.” (Banton, 1966)

V. E. Frankl (1985) said that the intimate quality that is so characteristic of love is no less present in religion. He claims that there is a phenomenon of unconscious religiosity, which is the hidden relationship which man has towards the transcendental, that is buried
within men. If this relationship is aimed at a thing called God, then it ceases to be unconscious which should only be true if man was unaware of any God or of any relationship towards God. It, therefore, must be a hidden connection of man to God, who is himself hidden. He identifies the religiosity of man with something personal to that man and not a collective practice. Religiosity becomes genuine. The moment man is not shoved into it, but feels himself obliged towards it, which obligation is arrived at by the unfettered choice of man who using his free will opts for religion. The aim of religion is to attain spiritual salvation, not an insurance policy that guarantees a smooth life, free from all conflict. Religion can provide man with much more than can his local shrink but, on the other hand, religion can also be demanding. It is at this point that a link can be seen between morality and religion (Cohen; 2003: 505-508).

According to F.D.E. Scheiermacher (1988), religion and religious morality are predicated that each individual is free and determined that every individual has his own personal morality which defines his humanity. He tries to prove the superiority of religion over morality and metaphysics, an approach seen in works of J. Krishnamurthy (Cohen, 2003: 483-486). To take everything individual as a part of the whole, everything limited as a representation of the infinite that is religion. The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence.

Robin Horton (1993) says the turn to religion occurs after more mundane irreligious models have failed to provide aid. Religion is intended to facilitate those situations where no natural alternative exists (Cohen; 2003: 459).

Brian Morris (1995) defines it as, “any one who studies the human condition is for me an anthropologist, whereas the rubric “religion”, to me, covers all phenomenon that are seen as having a sacred or supra-empirical quality – totemism, myths, witchcrafts, ritual, spiritual belief, symbolism, and the rest.”

Rudolf Otto (1999) says, one cannot view religion only through its rational dimension and a key ingredient of religion is the religious, experimental, and emotional component. Religious feeling is a complex mix of “irrational and rational element”. He equates two polar opposites of the religious experience – irrational verses refined (Cohen; 2003: 495-496).
In 2001, Andrew Newberg discovered very specific brain signals appearing during religious ritual encounters or other spiritual and meditative experiences. These signals were identical to those that appeared when a person found himself face-to-face with the truth. He concluded religion distorts the minds of its believers and is untrustworthy. It exerts influence through self-delusion. It perpetuated itself through falsehood but ceased to play a positive role. Phony revelation and empty fantasies lie at the source of all religions (Cohen; 2003: 459-460).

Sociological Theories

The sociological theories of religion were also widely accepted. Aristotle said that man created God after their own image not only with regard to form but also with regard to the manner of life. Montesquieu (1750) said that religion can have the most useful social function and it will be found to conform to the type of government, with which it is associated. It is suited to the people’s way of life (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 49).

According to Robertson Smith (1882), clansmen were conceived to be of one blood, their totem was of the same blood as their clan. Sociologically, God was the clan itself divinized and idealized. The clan periodically expresses the unity of its members and of them with their God and revitalized itself by slaying the totemic creature and eating its raw flesh in a sacred feast. Since God, clansmen, and totem were of one blood, each member of the clan incorporated sacramentally a practice of the divine life into his own individual life (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 51-53).

According to William James (1890), religion serves the purpose of giving comfort, security, confidence, relief, and reassurance (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 48).

In 1899, Durkheim gave a theory of religion. For him, religion is a social fact. It arises out of the nature of social life. It is the way society maintains its solidarity and ensures its continuity. Religion belongs to a broader class, sacred; everything real and ideal belongs to one of the two opposed classes, profane. Religion is a system of ideas by which individuals represent themselves to the society to which they belong and their relation to it. He observed that totemic creatures are not worshipped because they are not important
but designs are. Totemic creatures are selected because they are suitable models for pictorial representation. Totem is both the symbol of the God and society. Therefore, the God of the clan is clan personified. The great God is the synthesis of all the clans represented in them. Rites are external translations of conception and belief. They help in bringing social solidarity. Religious ideas are produced by the synthesis of individual minds and collective action, but once produced they have a life of their own (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 53-71).

Francis Cornford (1912) said that souls and Gods are representation of some structure. The soul is the collective soul of the group, the society itself, hence it is immoral. From the notion of soul, the representation of God develops when a certain degree of political complexity, individualization, and sophistication has been attained (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 73).

Carveth Read (1920) says, religion and magic were useful in giving support to leaders and hence in sustaining order, government and custom. Both are delusions but natural selection favors them. Totemic dances give excellent physical training and spirit in cooperation (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 48-49).

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1922) said that religion gives a sense of dependence on spiritual beings outside our selves. It helps in maintaining social solidarity (Evans-Pritchard; 1965: 48).

According to Henry Bergson (1935), religion came into being as a result of personal needs of each individual as well as needs of the societies that existed in ancient times. Religion came on to the seen under the heavy influences of human emotions. It is more a reaction to fear than fear itself. It can be compared to witchcraft since both contain similar characteristics. He saw the development of religion changing from the static to the dynamic. He reduces all religion to the core product of human effort (Cohen; 2003: 463-468).

Robert Bellah (1965) says that society feels compelled to follow a set of religious precepts that have been accepted by a majority of its members. Religion’s chief function is its being the axis around which the culture of a specific society rotates. Being the
central axis it supplies rigid definitions of the world. It is known for its proclivity to deal with life’s crisis and transitions (Cohen; 2003: 526-530).

According to Karl Popper, religion may be considered a set of symbols that are prone to institutionalization so that they either turn into social norms or become engrained in the religious man. Religious symbols are distinguished from all others in that they describe nature and reality in the broadest of its terms (Cohen; 2003: 526).

Clifford Geertz (1973) gave the definition of religion as, “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivation in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of actuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” According to him, religion is a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of a system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and second, the relating of these systems to social structural and psychological process (Geertz; 1973).

F. Fukayama (1992) says a religious person seeks recognition from his God through the religious ceremonies that he performs. He opines that religion, nationalism and customs which have their origin in tradition will always act as a barrier that blocks the establishment of successful democratic political institutions, as well as stifles the flow of an economic free market (Cohen; 2003: 487-491).

According to Ernst Gellner (1994), one of the factors that are operative in the founding and preservation of nationalism is the religious factor (as in theistic religion). He failed to see any fundamental link between nationalism and any form of theistic religion (Cohen; 2003: 512-516).

Robert Hinde (1999) says that religion is a stubborn and undesirable phenomenon. The reason for religion’s prominence has to do with a human mental problem. It has a positive influence on man and society, but efforts should be made to see if one can attain the same commendable results without having to contend with religion and thereby render the need for the latter redundant (Cohen; 2003: 501-505).

Mircea Eliade (2000) says that religions contain ritual practices that entrench their myth and strengthen the inner faith of believers, fortifying the bond with the Gods that protect
them. Rituals and ceremonies deal with problems relating to death, helping to overcome the fear of death, which is dealt with by instilling the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Religion and its myths and rituals help men bear history’s load, taking in account both the social and individual dimensions (Cohen; 2003: 496-501).

**Substantive Definitions**

Early in the history of social science, Tylor (1871) wanted a minimum definition that would prevent categorizing primitive religions with spiritualism, which was in disrepute in Europe. The primitives, he proposed, were explaining the difference between life and death, and they conceived of life as animation by spirits. Tylor used religion, which had favorable connotations, to refer to a “belief in spiritual beings” with this in mind; such beliefs were primitives’ equivalents of today’s life sciences. Tylor’s definition is often cited as the first substantive one. Substantive definitions are often used in otherwise functionalist analyses. Ross saw religion as something that would exert a certain social control, but he defined it as belief about the Unseen, with such attendant feelings as fear, wonder, reverence, gratitude, and love, and such institutions as prayer, worship, and sacrifice (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Similarly, Parsons’s early work (1937) developed functionalism while using a substantive concept of religion. He gave Weber’s writings about charisma a functional reading: Charisma would be that which functioned to legitimate power by associating governance with teleological meanings. Religious beliefs, defined by their reference to the supernatural, would characterize a particular kind of charisma. Later commentators, not interpreting Weber as a functionalist, would still see him implicitly taking religion to be a patterning of social relationships around beliefs in supernatural powers, creating ethical consequences (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Sorokin (1947) straddles the formal and substantive approaches. Taken literally, his definition is formal: a set of ultimate values expressed in a credo, objectified by vehicles of a cult, and socialized by conduct complying with religious norms that unite members into one religious group. However, his examples suggest that he had the supernatural in mind as the religious content. Nevertheless, he had a functionalist concern; his reference
to uniting members into one religious group echoes the functional portion of Durkheim’s (1912) definition (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Substantive definitions often appear in critiques of functionalism. Horton (1960) argued that people reject as not genuine religious like conduct done for (functional) reasons of social symbolism. He modeled his own definition after Tylor’s: an extension of the field of people’s social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. Glock and Stark (1955) also used a substantive definition in preparing for their influential questionnaire studies. Their key term was ultimate meaning, and they felt obliged to explain that belief systems of ultimate meaning that had supernatural referents were religious (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Berger (1967) at first merely noted his own preference for a substantive definition. He cited the concept of the holy as described by Otto (1923), but saw it all as a matter of personal preference having little scientific import. Revealingly, Otto’s phenomenology of the holy rests upon the experiences of social actors, and it was this fact (rather than culturally distant allusions by anthropologists to beliefs in supernatural beings) that appealed to Berger. Later he spelled out his methodological preference for the Verstehen approach in social science that grounded scientists’ definitions in those of social actors, but he still called his definitional preference “substantive” (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Meanwhile, Garrett (1974) also revived interest in the substantive approach, similarly referring to Otto and expressing concern about giving adequate accounts of religious participants’ experiences. He found concepts analogous to Otto’s in the works of Simmel, Weber, and Troeltsch, and citations of Otto in those of Wach, Scheler, and Schutz. Significantly, it is the effects of the religious rather than the transcendent itself that was being described in all these works — an inherently “troublesome” circumstance. The implication was that even the substantive definitions falter (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

James did not develop a general definition but merely pointed to his topic. There could be a list of features, and any several could serve as criteria for considering something religious but need not all appear in any one religion (1902: 39). James was interested in
personal religion: feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine (1902). As he defined divine, it was quite broad: “only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely” (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Substantive definitions are sometimes thought to resist a certain ideological, passive image of humans. If religion defined functionally would benefit society, the social actor takes no directive role in the process. If religion seems to bring some cognizance of society itself into the consciousness of the adherent, religion itself is a transmitter of charisma or legitimacy to a passive social actor. But if religion is defined substantively, the religious person is seen as the active agent maintaining a particular viewpoint (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

**Functional Definitions**

Featuring what religions do rather than their contents, functional definitions enjoy the advantage of dodging the issue of the truth-value of beliefs.

Kidd (1894), influential in his day, wrote in the social evolution tradition, with a focus on conflict. Societies having features that gave them advantages in conflict survived; he called such features “functions”. Religion was a function; it was any belief that provided an ultra rational sanction for the pro-social whenever individual interests and those of the social organism were antagonistic. Although similar to Comte’s concept, this seemed acceptable to scholars because it was not associated, as was Comte’s, with any religious program. Kidd’s approach was readily incorporated into the far different sociologies of Small and Vincent (1894), Ward (1898), and Ross (1901). Only Ward made such a function definitive of religion; for him, religion would be a substitute in the rational world for instinct in the sub rational world. Cooley (1909) defined religion in terms of a micro function: a need of human nature, centering in a craving to make life seem rational and good (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).
The functionalist element of Durkheim’s definition — “beliefs and practices that unite into a single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them” (1912) — was macro-functional, too much so because it identified the religious group with the total society (Dabbelaere and Lauwers, 1973). Updated applications of Durkheim’s macro-functionalism in the “civil religion” literature give that aspect of his definition a continuing relevance. Some functionalists would distinguish religion from magic, with religion serving latent functions in public activity and magic serving manifest instrumental purposes in private activity (Malinowski, 1925). Parsons (1951), thought religion central to “the integration of cognitive systems in their implications for action”, and defined religious ideas as answers to problems of meaning (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Definitional functionalists would generally phrase religion’s benefits in individualist terms in the manner of Cooley, given that evidence contradicted the macro functional theories (Friedrichs, 1985). For Luckmann (1967), religion would be the transcending of human biological nature and the formation of a self – an inevitable occurrence that all societies effect in individuals. For Yinger (1970), religion is social but relativizes evils and desires for individuals; he defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices with which a group struggles with the ultimate problems of human life (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

No doubt, various human phenomena could be “religious” in the functionalist manner. If functional definitions did not specify identifiable functions, one would want to label the definitions formal rather than functional. Schneider (1970) saw a potential for theoretical development in the sociology of religion in functionally examining all kinds of conduct as if it were religion, and vice versa (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Stark and Bainbridge (1979), like Durkheim, used a two-part definition when they introduced the idea of compensators, postulations of reward according to explanations that are hard to evaluate. Religion would be a system of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions. The “compensator” part is micro-functional, and the “supernatural” part, substantive (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).
The turn to the micro level lends an entirely different flavor to functionalism. Suddenly religion embodies the utopian spaces that the major institutions of society neglect. Religion comes to be defined as an imaginative enterprise that addresses the unfulfilled promises of life (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

**Verstehende Definitions**

Verstehen approaches to definition have not often emerged in theoretical statements in the study of religion. Searching for understandings within particular social worlds is implicit in ethnographic and participant observation methodology. Runciman (1969) criticized both substantive and functional definitions by pointing out that social actors decide such matters as whether there is a sacred-profane divide or an empirical-non-empirical distinction in their world, and that, moreover, any two members of a society might disagree (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Again, how can we recognize the social actors’ definitions as defining religion? Swatos (1990) advocates beginning with a very minimal substantive definition, a sensitizing concept we might call it, and then using the verstehen or “definition of the situation” approach to find out what the social actors do with what had been tentatively identified as religious. The preliminary definition could use the supernatural as its criterion, with either the transcendent or the immanent being supernatural (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

**Formal Definitions**

Formal definitions have a long history in the study of religion, but they have received little attention. Writers often cite Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, written late in his career (1912), as the locus of a definition that has both substantive and functional elements (Dobbelaere and Lauwers 1973), but his earlier definition (1899) exemplifies the formal approach. One seeks to find how religious facts can be grouped, even on the basis of secondary traits. Whatever is not found in all cases could not be definitive; consequently, he ruled out the unknowable as a criterion, because primitives
have no such category, as well as belief in God, because Buddhists do not have them. Durkheim ended up with a definition that he later judged valid but too formal and hard to use: obligatory beliefs connected with clearly defined practices that are related to the beliefs’ objects (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Simmel, the founder of formal sociology, related religion to a moral imperative rather than to knowledge. By distinguishing such forms as moral imperative and knowledge from their contents, he was able to argue that “the religious state of the soul produces no logically necessary, pre-determined content” and that “no content possesses in itself the logical necessity to become religion” (Simmel, 1984 [1903]: 69). He observed that religion, like morality, resided in the person’s response to an object, and this was key to the religious form, as he saw it (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Wach (1951) specified the religious response — elicited by an experience of ultimate reality, response by the whole person and not merely a cognitive or affective response, an experience having the potential of becoming the most intense of all, and leading to an urge to act. He maintained that such religion was a human universal. So long as religion would be a response, any particular content, such as the holy, would be a secondary, non-defining feature (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Formal definitions can be used with other kinds of theoretical problematic. We have already observed that Durkheim deemed his earlier, formal definition compatible with his later functional theory, and O’Dea (1966: 1) used a formal concept of religion in a functionalist presentation. The formal strategy often looks for a structure that resembles known cases. Zeldin (1969) points to the narrative structure of a fall from and return to an ideal state — a structure she sees in Soviet Marxism and in world religions. Lemert (1975) and Blasi (1980) take the structure of related discontinuity between an empirical, mundane order and a super empirical, cosmic-level order as definitive of religion.

Richard (1978) observed that this can lead to an analytical program of seeing the cosmic otherness being domesticated (e.g., Berger, 1974) or a domestic signaling of the relevance of the other. Turner (1976) accepted the basic structure of a discontinuous relatedness but rejected the empirical-super-empirical phraseology. Maduro (1982: 6)
shows religion’s role at the nexus of two kinds of consciousness in social critique and
transformation (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm).

Some argue that religion doesn’t really exist — there is only culture. Jonathan Z. Smith
writes in Imagining Religion: “...while there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena,
of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or
another, by one criterion or another, as religion — there is no data for religion. Religion
is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic
purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no
existence apart from the academy.” (http://atheism.about.com/od/weeklyquotes/a/smith01.htm)

In the above sections, religion is being defined by various authors from their point of
view. It holds different importance in different cultures. These definitions of religion tend
to suffer from one of the two problems: they are either too narrow and exclude many
belief systems which most agree are religious, or they are too vague and ambiguous,
suggesting that just about any and everything is a religion. While some definitions drive
theories and determine conclusions, there is not one satisfactory definition that can define
religion in the present day world. With globalization and new kinds of technologies
coming up, interaction among different cultures is increasing day by day. People are
adopting new life styles. In this scenario, the definitional issue takes on renewed
importance.