Chapter II
Definition, Nature & Scope of Religion
Definition of Religion

A catalogue of definitions can be gathered but three kinds of definition will suffice Viz. Descriptive, Subtractive and Functional.

Descriptive:
Such type of definitions describes what religion" really" or "basically" is in terms of what, in a given writers judgment. They designate certain kinds of beliefs and practices of religion but do not evaluate them on one hand; nor on the other, do they indicate their function or seek to discover whether other beliefs and practices perform similar functions. Thus in Edward B Taylor’s words religion is “belief in spiritual beings” this kind of definition has the advantage of being clear-cut and reasonably easy to apply. One can proceed from it to a classification of the kinds of spiritual beings and kinds of practices and organizations that are found in various societies. Such a definition naturally draws attention to the differences among religions as distinct historical entities. The emphasis is placed primarily on religions as cultural systems. Their doctrines, rites, sacred texts, typical group structure,
and the like, are described, contrasted, and compared. This is what religion is.

**Substantive:**

Subtractive definitions can be of great value, particularly for those who are concerned with religions as historical and cultural facts rather than with religion as panhuman phenomenon. They are of greater value in the study of stable societies, where destructive and coherent religious systems are likely to develop, than they are in the study of changing societies; for in the latter, religion itself is also in the process of changing, which continually complicates and attempt to define what it is, but equally suggests new efforts to study what it does. A representative of such definitions would be of Brightman, he aptly defines:

"Religion is a concern about experiences which are regarded as of supreme values, devotion towards a power or powers believed to originate, increase and conserve these values and some suitable expression of this concern & devotion whether through symbolic crides or thro' other individual & social conduct"
For many problems, the functional kind of definition suggested in the previous sentence is the most useful. Some may prefer to define religion in terms of values or in terms of essence, but for analytic purposes the need is for a definition that focuses on process. A comparative science of religion, which must perforce be involved not only in the vast range of differences in belief and practice, but also in the similarities that justify the use of a common term to refer in this whole range, has to be concerned with function. This is particularly true if the kinds of questions one is interested in referring not only to religion as a cultural fact, but to religion as a manifestation of character and as one aspect of society. It is widely believed that for many purposes it is a mistake to separate the analysis of culture (The System of norms and usages designating right behavior to the member of a Society) from the analysis of character (The organized system of tendencies of an individual); and it is equally a mistake to separate those from the analysis of social systems ("Networks of interactive relationships") as Talcott Parsons calls them. Special studies of culture, character, and society are appropriate; but their theories must remain on a highly
abstract level. To come nearer to the understanding of concrete action study of their mutual influence.

It is paradoxical that in order to focus attention more closely on religion as concrete behaviors, definitions must be more abstract. To define religion, for example, simply as “belief in God” (A definition that can be interpreted as either valuative or substantive or both) is to give it a fairly sharp referent; but such a definition raises no question of the relationship between personal anxiety or concern for one’s salvation, for example, belief in God press no problems of the relationship between the efforts to maintain social order and religion as defined. The more abstract definition holds an implicit concern for the analysis of actual behavioral. It points to major question of human action; and thus, in our judgment is more fruitful for the study of a science of human behavior. We need not say that it is truer only that it will serve the needs of current scientific work more fully than Valuative or Substantive definitions.

The person who seeks to define religion in functional terms, to be sure, faces a number of difficulties. He must avoid a definition that is tied specifically to his own religious
experience or to cultures similar to his own. He must recognize that the intense specialization of modern societies gives him a perspective on religion very different from that obtainable in less highly differentiated societies, where the infusion of religious elements into all phases of life is more obvious, perhaps the most serious difficulty is related to the ease with which one can drift into a Valuative position in his definition without intending to do so. If religion is defined by what are thought to be its functions, then one should not be surprised to find it functional that is having only supportive consequences. And this may lead, in turn, to a circularity of reasoning. If it can be shown that a given system of belief and practices that is generally thought to be a religion is not performing the functions by which religion has been defined then one declare that a system is not really religion at all. This error can be by indicating that religion is an effort to perform certain functions for man. This does not imply that it always succeeds, nor that systems that do not succeed are therefore not religions. Nor does it necessarily imply that one desires those functions to be performed”.¹

¹ William James defines religion as “The feeling, acts and experience of individual man in their solitude so far as they
apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.

Hoffding defines, religion as “the conservation of values” according to Alexander "Religion is Faith in deity”. To Patrie “Religion is the consciousness of our practical relation to an indivisible spiritual order.

White Head says “Religion is the vision of something, which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things” W.T. Stace defined religion as “the hunger of the soul for the impossible, the unattainable, and the unconceivable.”

According to Kant “ Religion is a matter of the will it being understood and identified with practical reason that is to say certain acts ought to be done or that certain attitudes ought to be adopted.

Swami Vivekanand states, Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas nor in intellectual argumentation: it is being and becoming it is realization. Thus religion is the art of living through right action, how to live our daily life in harmony
within ourselves and with others and to lead a life of peace and happiness.²

E.B Tylor, one of the pioneers of comparative religion “Suggest that a religion is belief in supernatural beings”. Supernaturalist definitions of this kind have largely fallen into disfavour in the study of today’s religion mainly because they tend to focus on the doctrinal element of religion a key element in Christianity of course, but one, which command less importance in to the other major world traditions. Even in Christianity despite its history, creeds, confessions and definitions of orthodoxy and heresy most if not all Christians would agree that there is more to the Christian faith than belief: their worship, sacraments, a whole way of living and means of salvation that offers hope of a life to come.

For reasons such as this, many sociologists of religion operate with a ‘functional’ definition of religion; the important feature of religion is what it does for its followers, rather than what may exist in a supernatural realm. Thus yinger defines religion as “Religion, then, can be defined as the system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with those ultimate problems of human life. It
expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human aspirations. Hence, a religion enables its followers to come to terms with key events in their lives, for example, by rites of passage and by doctrinal explanations about matters such as suffering and death.

Another approach to define religion is to consider the characteristic forms which religion takes. Most religions involve in myths, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, symbol, sacred texts and so on. Ninian Smart has identified school broad categories of component that are salient features of most, if not all religious: the ethical, the ritual, and the social/instrumental. He calls the six dimensions of religion.

We might say that a group of people constitutes a religions group if they operate functionally as a religion – that is to say, if they offer a means of coping with the key events and the adversities and misfortunes of life, using the key characters of religious practices which are identified by scholars such as Smart.

Religions tend to have overarching goals that seem humanly impossible to attain, the salvation of the world, the enlightenment of all living beings, or the ultimate triumph of
good over evil are all goals which, from a human standpoint, are unattainable, followers of religions are not like social workers or relief organizations that simply focus on one specific type of problem, such as crime or poverty: the goal is nothing short of the transformation of the entire human race, or even the entire world. In order to achieve this, two elements are needed. First a religion typically identifies a root problem that it claims is the cause of all-ill for the Christians it is ‘sin’. For the Buddhist dukkha (un satisfactoriness), for the Hindu ‘maya’ (illusion). The world is not brought to perfection simply by patching up a few human problems, by building a few more homes for the destitute or raising money for famine relief: religions aims to treat the cause, not the symptoms. Allied to this, there is a second characteristic of religion: religions hold that the world’s problems are not solved by human effort alone, but require supernatural who want to purify their own lives, and not merely offer first aid and for specific human problems. For some followers of religion, this means miraculous intervention: for others, it is constant prayer or meditation in which powers that transcends the human realm are invoked and employed.
If at times religion may seem to be uninvolved, even unconcerned about suffering in the world, this may be because they are seeking the means to achieve a more radical remedy for the cause of all. The monk who lives apart from the world does little that is of direct benefit for those who suffer, however, since he has renounced the worldly quest for wealth and material comfort and is developing the virtues of purity and compassion, he is removing from within himself the cause of the world’s ills, and serves as an example to those

Now religious movements are sometimes accused of not being genuine religions but rather business companies of political organization. One important way of verifying a movement’s claim to a religions identity can be found by examining its ultimate aims. If the unification of church were only attempting to secure the triumph of democracy over communism, then it would indeed be nothing more than a political organization; however, since it seeks to achieve the restoration and salvation of all humanity, and employs prayer and study as means of furthering its ultimate goals, its identity is more automatically religious.
Nature and scope of Religion

The theological concept of religion which is reflected in the popular ones centers round as supernatural power, other than independence, of human experience. The assurance of God’s being comes in this approach, not from any internal experience but, from the faith in an external revelation, primary emphasis thus, seems to be on belief and faith and not on inner experience, though even this approach has to recognize that man’s religion is conditioned to a large extent by man’s interest in his own destiny.

On the other hand, man’s inner experience is of primary importance for the psychoanalytical writers and humanist thinkers with existentialist sympathies. If man experiences God, argues Ludwig Furbish, this experience gives us greater information about the man himself than about God, God being regarded by him as the projected image of man himself. No man of religion would agree with this reduction of God to a creation of the human mind. Still the fact emphasized by all the psychologist, is undeniable that man’s concerns for his own destiny is the prime motive behind man’s search for god. A very important contribution of the psychologists to the philosophy of religion in their emphasis on the basis of the
individual's religious experience, and their conception of religious experience as private and internal. For William James, religion is "The feelings of acts and experiences of the individual men in their solitude, So far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they many consider the divine. A.N. Whitehead's famous definition religion as what the individual does with his solitariness" equally seeks to explain religion more or less excessively in terms of personal inner experience. He recognizes the objective reference of religion as a rather secondary factor in religion. He believes that the religion of solitariness is a later and a mature emergent, which is preceded by religion as ritual and belief. Vedantic thinkers would agree with the above observation. Dr. Radhakrishan for example differentiates the essence of religion from its social aspects and morality, Religion for him is some thing inward and personal that unifies all values and organizes all experiences.

Other Philosophers with existentialistic inclination also seek to understand religion in terms of human experience and respond. Schlermacher's famous definition of religion as "the feeling of absolute dependence ", or Paul Tellich's as "The ultimate concern of man" are examples. Similarly, Rudolf
Otto's entire analysis of the numinous is characteristic of this approach. Though recognizing the objectivity of the 'numen' Rudolf's entire presentation of religion is in terms of man's experience of mysterium- tremendum' yet all the above writers differ from strictly existentialist thinkers. For them the experience of the natural man, such as the creature feeling, points directly to a transcendent God. Rudolf Otto's God though transcendent God and supernatural, it is still known in and through human experience.

But for thinkers like Kierkegaard, There is no direct way from the experience of god to the assurance of god's being. Man is separated from god by such an infinite gulf that man can never know god through his unaided experience. He has to accept the truth about god and his saving grace on the basis of an external revelation. This revelation is not accepted on any rational grounds, but is opted on faith by an act of free choice. There is a decided anti rationalistic attitude here which depreciates not only reason but also the entire human experience.
The Theistic existentialists, thus, arrive at the conclusion as to the basis or centrality of the revelation to the entire religious approach through an analysis of subjective experience, while it has been the basic contention of the theology since time immemorial. Religion, as it is generally understood, is not only based on a central revelation, but its entire development is also determined in a way by that revelation thus, the most basic tenet of Christianity is God’s revelation to mankind in and through Christ, the son of god. This forms not only the basis of the Trinitarians concept of god and the entire church creed regarding the atonement, resurrection etc, the faith in Christ as the saviors and the son of god has been the greatest determining factor in the religions experience of the Christians- For example, the awareness or experience of the Divine presence is more often interpreted by Christian mystics and saints as that of Christ the son and not that of god, the father.
References:

1) J. Mullon Yinger "Types of Definitions-The scientific study of Religion" (Macmillan Company Ltd, London) P.4-6

2) "Problems and Perspectives of Social philosophy" Vol.4 (International Congress of Social philosophy, 2004) P.286
