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The page numbers of the original publication have been inserted between square brackets and are set in bold. I have added another reference to footnotes 21 and 26, and inserted the full details of the new reference in footnote 21 in the bibliography. I have corrected several typos and made a few other corrections.

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CONTEXTS, CONCEPTS & CONTESTS: TOWARDS A PRAGMATICS OF DEFINING 'RELIGION'

> Nothing is more wearisome than to have some philosopher invent his own meaning for the word *religion* and then go through history […] trying to force all religion whatever into his own mold.[1]

In this concluding article, I advocate a pragmatic, anti-essentialist and anti-hegemonic approach to defining 'religion' and 'religions' as the core concepts of the Science(s) of Religion(s). The reasons for this plea are several. One is that past academic research on 'the religions of humankind' has shown them to possess not only very complex, but also widely different contents, shapes and functions. They present a much too disorderly and indistinct collection of dense and diverse cultural phenomena for them to be adequately defined, for a long time from now, in any definitively 'essential'(ist), *i.e.* universally valid, way by a substantive definition of religion.[2] At least, not by one that has a defining trait, or *definiens*,[3] which they can all be shown to have in common in a way that will convince the global community of scholars of religions.

An important reason for this state of affairs is that the modern terms 'religion' and 'religions' are diffuse and untidy prototypical[4] [**464**] concepts of recent Western origin.

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[1] Smith 1968: 8 (his italics)
[2] On 'substantive' (versus 'functional') definitions of religions, cf. Snoek in this volume.
[3] On the *definiens* as the formal element in definitions of religions, cf. Platvoet 1990, 1994.
[4] By a prototype term I mean a familiar word (a 'folk' concept, or 'natural-language' category), of which the users of a language have acquired a pre-theoretical intuition of its broad meaning and range in the process of socialisation and language acquisition. That intuition provides them with a 'feeling' about how they may use it expertly and correctly in ordinary social communication. Its core is constituted by a few traits or elements of one or some members of a category that are a clear, or the clearest, case of membership of that natural category for them. Those features serve as a rough and ready pre-theoretical model, sketch, outline or stereotype by means of which they include other members in the category on the strength of an intuitive grasp of the degree of their goodness of fit or prototypicality. Prototypical 'natural language' categories usually allow for degrees of membership, have blurred edges, and overlap with other categories. Their purpose is not the [**464**] analytical one of sharp classification and unambiguous definition, but fluent, pre-theoretical communication in the daily affairs of ordinary life. Prototypical terms serve as pragmatic devices of easy but effective communication between 'natural' language users in ordinary social life. Precisely because of their limited and mainly hidden cognitive contents, prototypical

'Religions' is a label that comprises an indistinct range of very complex and very different phenomena in human societies and cultures, which are accommodated under it because they are regarded by us, Westerners, on the basis of our Western notions, as at least in certain respects similar. The purpose of prototypical terms is the pragmatic one of the quick and easy comprehension in outline, not in any detail, of what is conveyed by them. They operate, in a rough and ready manner and at the pre-reflective level of 'natural language', in 'ordinary' social communication between the rank and file members of society in modern Western societies.[5] The complex concepts of 'religion' and 'religions', and the indistinct collections of data covered by them, constitute the field of study of the academic disciplines of the Study of Religions. Some of these disciplines are preoccupied with mainly 'religion', particularly its Western manifestation(s); others with mainly 'religions', in their Western and non-Western diversity.

In addition to huge differences between single religions synchronically, historical study shows that, diachronically, at least three[6] large groups of religions may be discerned that are distinctly, perhaps even radically, different. However, virtually all definitions of 'religion' proposed so far were modelled after the 'exemplar' which had the best prototypical fit for modern Westerners – scholars of religion and religions included – to wit, modern Western-Christian mainline religion, and the functions which that religion was perceived to serve in modern Western societies.[7] That religion, however, belongs to only one of these three groups of religions. The two other groups clearly invalidate, in different ways, the standardising essentialist claims of most definitions – though usually not their (limited) usefulness – based on the analysis of the Western-Christian prototype and other [**465**] religions, such as Islam and Judaism, that happen to have a close 'fit' with it in Western perception.[8]

There are other reasons for disputing the universalising extrapolations of essentialist definitions of 'religion'. One is the semantic history of the concept of 'religion' itself in Western societies from the 3rd century BCE[9] up to the present time. Two more are the distinctly different conceptualisations of 'religion' in some other non-Western cultural traditions; and the absence of a concept of 'religion' in all the other societies. Again another is the growing trend in methodological reflection on the study of religions, which advocates a transition from essentialist to instrumental, or 'operational',[10] definitions of religions, because it has become aware of the unacknowledged cultural biases

terms serve as dense symbols. On prototype, prototype theory, and the cultural biases inherent in prototypical concepts as standardising agents of analytical concepts, cf. Saler 1993:197-226.

[5] Cf. Saler (1993: 207) on prototype as a convenient grammatical fiction by which we express, in a stereotypic or generic way, non-reflective judgements, of the type of 'natural-language categories', about degrees of prototypicality or goodness-of-fit.

[6] Though other, more narrow divisions can (and should) be made; for them, cf. Platvoet 1993, 1998c.

[7] Cf. Southwold 1978: 367; Saler 1993: 199-200, 208, 212

[8] Cf. Saler 1993: 207-217

[9] 'Before the common era'; I will use CE ('common era') instead of AD, *anno Domini*.

[10] 'Operational' is to be understood here as the definition, concept or theory that can be made to 'work', i.e. to serve or perform certain useful analytical tasks.

in especially essentialist ones. It recognises also that any definition of religion has only a limited instrumental value.

The structure of my article is as follows. I will firstly outline the semantic history, of the Western concept of 'religion', in order to show the major shifts of meaning attributed to that term since its earliest attestation in the Latin language in the 3rd century BCE. I will point also to the 'socio-genetics' of those shifts and indicate how the contexts in which they emerged conditioned and constrained the various meanings of the terms 'religion' and 'religions'. I will then briefly outline the three major, vastly different groups of 'religions' of humankind, in order to present some indication of their dense diversity in the past and the present. In addition, I will point, although only in passing, to the different semantics of certain key concepts in a few other religions, and to the complete absence of such terms and semantics in most others. All this points to the urgent need to revise our essentialism. We need to take a critical look at some of our naïve assumptions. One of them is that we know fairly well what (other) 'religions' are like. Another that we may establish by philosophical reflection on religion in Western society, or by its scholarly analysis, what the 'nature' of religion is, i.e. by what trait it is defined wherever and whenever it was or is found.

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From Latin religio *to modern 'religions'*

> I propose that we formally acknowledge […] our individual idealizations of 'mainstream' Judaisms and Christianities as 'prototypical' in the highest degree of the category religion.[11]

Below I present an outline of a contextual semantic history of 'religion' from ancient *religio* to modern 'religions'. It runs from the late 3rd century BCE to the middle of the 18th century CE when its modern meaning seems to have been unambiguously established. I will deal successively with the Roman roots of *religio*, the patristic polemics surrounding it, its medieval meanings, its early modern shifts, and finally the transition to its modern meaning. The outline covers two millennia, from Plautus to Hume.

Roman roots

As is normal for 'community religions',[12] the polytheism of the powerful agrarian republic of Rome had been hospitable to other 'religions', notably Etruscan and Greek,[13] for centuries before the term *religio* first appeared in Latin literature in the late 3rd century BCE.[14] Romans had, therefore, been 'religious' for centuries without developing a

[11] Saler 1993: 212
[12] See below
[13] Cf. Schilling 1969: 450-452, 460-466, 472-473; Henkel 1979: 81, 93-96, 99-102, 105, 108, 114-115, 138, 145-146, 167, 254 n102
[14] Cf. Ronca 1992: 44

concept and a term for that pervasive aspect of their culture, as is equally normal for their kind of religions.

When terms for expressing aspects of it did emerge, however, Rome was on the verge of being destroyed by Hannibal in the Second Punic War (218-201). That period was marked by what Livius referred to later as 'sudden religion', *repens religio*,[15] outbursts of religious activity spurred by the numerous 'signs' (*prodigia, ostenta, portenta, monstra et miracula*) which were being reported and understood as signifying that the wrath of the gods (*ira deum*) must be assuaged. Despite numerous rites aimed at restoring peace and harmony with the gods (*pax veniaque deorum*), Rome had grown desperate because it could not win the war. Therefore in 205 BCE, the Senate of Rome decided to despatch state emissaries to Pergamon [**477**] in Asia Minor to request that it permit that the Greek-Phygian-Anatolian goddess Cybele, be installed in Rome's most ancient quarter (*Roma quadrata*), in order that she might grant it victory over Hannibal. This goddess, who was also known as the 'Great Mother of the gods of Mount Idaea' (*Mater Magna Deum Idaea*), was selected because the war had strongly fostered the belief, that Rome had been founded by Aeneas. This tradition had been popular since the 4th century BCE, but was now at the heart of an anti-Carthaginian identity construction in Rome by means of 'invention of tradition'.[16] The *Mater Magna* was solemnly installed, in the shape of a meteoric stone, on Capitol Hill on 4 April 204 BCE despite her bringing with her own two Phrygian priests and their servants. These publicly honoured her, once a year, in ecstatic ways that were strange and repulsive to Romans.[17]

Plautus (before 250-184 BCE) was among the earliest authors to use the terms *religio* and *superstitiosus* in his comedy plays. Remarkably, he gave the first a 'secular' meaning: it expressed the obligation to accept an invitation to a meal;[18] and he also used *superstitiosus* as synonomous with *vates*, 'seer', without any depreciative connotations.[19] The outbursts of 'religion', with which many Romans expressed their reaction to the war, seem to have changed both meanings. Roman intellectuals came to look with distaste upon the 'surfeit' of *religio* which the common people of Rome displayed in time of war. In addition, the disfavour with which many Romans looked upon foreign rituals of the ecstatic kind, such as that for Cybele, grew when these soon became much more numerous in Rome after the Roman Empire had begun to expand rapidly in the early 2nd century BCE. *Religiosus*, and *superstitiosus* in particular, came to denote excess

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[15] Livius, *Ab urbe condita* 29, 10: 4; quoted in Henkel 1979: 132-133, 198, 288 n80; cf. also 139, 147

[16] Cf. Schilling 1969: 463-464; Henkel 1979: 101, 109-110, 119-131, 179-180. On the theory of the 'invention of tradition', cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1993[9].

[17] Henkel 1979: 161, 166, 170-172, 177

[18] Plautus, *Curculio* 350: *vocat me ad cenam; religio fuit, denegare nolui*, 'he invites me to the meal; I had to accept, I did not wish to refuse' (quoted in Ronca 1992: 58 n19; my translation). Ronca (1992: 47-48) identifies scrupulousness, with or without reference to gods or ancestors, as the earliest meaning of *religio*. For other examples of non-religious use, cf. Smith 1964: 23-24; Despland 1979: 24-25. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1871: 91/92, note 4) also remarks that the Romans used *religio* 'in a much wider meaning than religion only'.

[19] Plautus, *Rudens* 1139-1140: *quid si ista aut superstitiosa aut hariolast atque omnia / quidquid insit vera dicet?*, '[but] what if she be a seer or soothsayer and tells the truth about whatever may be the case?'; also *Curculio* 397 (quoted in Ronca 1992: 48, 58 n26; my translation).

of *religio*.[20] The rationalist poet Ennius (239-169 BCE) referred [**468**] to dream interpreters as 'superstitious seers and shameless soothsayers' (*superstitiosi vates impudentesque harioli*).[21] The term *superstitiosus* came especially to serve as the label for all those kinds of religious rituals favoured by the people whom the cultured upper class began, under the influence of Greek philosophy, to regard as gullible, ignorant, stupid, backward, weird, foreign, etc.

From the very moment, therefore, that the term *religio* emerged in Latin documents in the dramatic late 3rd century, it teamed up with *superstitiosus* (and initially also with *religiosus*). They served to discriminate between 'worship' (*religio*) acceptable to the upper class of Rome on the one hand, and 'deviant' rituals, whether homebred or imported, on the other. *Religio*, and *religiosus* soon after, came to serve as the stamp of approval, and *superstitiosus*, and from Cicero's time *superstitio*, as the garbage bin for all reprehensible rejects. The pair *religio(sus)/superstitio(sus)*, Ronca says, has served in that function from that time till now in 'scores of modern [Western, JP] languages'.[22] He also remarks, however, that they are not 'cross-cultural universals' but a dichotomy peculiar to the languages influenced directly or indirectly by Latin and Christianity.[23]

On top of its earliest connotation of scrupulousness, *religio* subsequently acquired further connotations. First of a sense of fear of, and awe at, the 'sanctity' of a place or event, and then of that sanctity itself, until in Cicero's time, it came to denote the public and 'pious' acts of worship (*religiones*)[24] that were cautiously, and meticulously, offered to the gods. As wrote Cicero: 'religion they term that which consists in the fear of, and the rituals for, the gods'.[25] *Religio* had to be public because the 'pious worship of the gods' (*deorum pius cultus*) constituted *omnis populi Romani religio*, 'the worship of all the Roman people', for it was held that the political fortunes of the republic were directly linked to them. The cult of the gods was, [**469**] therefore, under the direct supervision of the Senate of Rome. It had to be 'pious', because such a service was held to be due to the gods on the grounds of justice. And it had to be scrupulous, because the gods were to be feared: they would show their displeasure, it was believed, at incorrect performances and wreak vengeance on the state. It was this aspect of meticulousness in particular that is stressed by Cicero when he derived the etymology of *religio* from *relegere/religere*:

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[20] Cf. *religentem esse oportet, religiosus ne fuas*, 'one should be meticulous [in the worship of the gods], but not excessively so' (quoted in Ronca 1992: 58 n21; my translation). Chantepie de la Saussaye (1871: 91-92, note 4) refers to the parallel maxim, quoted by Cicero's friend, the astrologist Nigidius Figulus, *ex antiquo carmine* ('from an old song') and compiled by Aulus Gellius (2nd century CE) in his *Noctes Atticae* (IV: 9): *religentem esse oportet, religiosum nefas*, 'one ought to be meticulous [in the *cultus deorum*], but it is quite unacceptable if one overdoes it'.

[21] Quoted in Ronca 1992: 48; my translation. Cf. also Irmscher 1994: 63.

[22] Ronca 1992: 43

[23] Ronca 1992: 43-44

[24] Cicero, *De natura deorum* (1, 61): *caeremonias religionesque publicas*, 'public ceremonies and rituals' (quoted in Smith 1964: 186 n13; my translation).

[25] Cicero, *Invitatio ad Rhetoricam* (2, 66): *religionem eam quae in metu et caeremonia deorum sit appelant* (quoted in Ronca 1992: 47-48, 58 n22; my translation). For more details on the four stages of the semantic history of *religio* from Plautus to Cicero, cf. Ronca 1992: 47-48.

> Those who diligently retraced, and as it were recollected, all things pertaining to the cult of the gods, were called *religiosi* from *religere* [in the same way] as *elegantes* derives from *eligere*, *diligentes* from *diligere*, *intelligentes* from *intelligere*, for all these words share with *religiosus* the same root of *legere*.[26]

As *religio romana* consisted in public acts of worship supervised by the state, and the attitude of timid, scrupulous, 'piety' that should go with it in the officiants, it is clear that it should not be translated as 'the Roman religion', in the modern meaning of the term.[27] It is also clear that the Roman notion of *religio* was not descriptive, but prescriptive: the cultic actions were to be public and state controlled; and the 'proper' inner attitude during their performance was deemed to be due on the moral grounds of (the virtue of) justice.

That was even more clearly the case with *superstitio*, the purpose of which was plainly strategic: to moderate, reform, and even to eliminate certain cultic actions and attitudes of others. It was a contesting concept: it imposed alien norms on the performers. Cicero defined it as 'the unfounded fear of the gods' (*timor inanis deorum*),[28] and had to defend himself against the allegation that by uprooting superstition he was destroying *religio*.[29]

It may be concluded that the socio-genetics of these two concepts is complex and its outcome contingent. Exposure to foreign 'religions' certainly does not in itself explain this development. The [**470**] religious reactions to the narrow escape from destruction by Hannibal, Rome's subsequent success in empire building, the huge expansion of its demographic numbers, and the stratification of Roman society, seem also relevant. These developments exposed its public cult not only to influences from other 'community religions',[30] but also to the criticism of these religions by Greek philosophers,[31] to which Rome's upper class proved very receptive. In addition, its 'lower orders', many of them recent immigrants from elsewhere, proved highly susceptible to the numerous cults, preaching new soteriologies, that began to enter from the Hellenistic East. In brief, if before the Second Punic War, 'Roman religion' had been fairly homogeneous and had gone uncontested because, being inarticulate, it was incontestable, it then be-

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[26] Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2: 72: *qui autem omnia quae ad cultum deorum pertinerent diligenter retractarent et tamquam relegerent sunt dicti religiosi ex relegendo, ut elegantes ex eligendo, <ex> diligendo diligentes, ex intellegendo intellegentes; his enim in verbis omnibus inest via legendi eadem quae in religioso* (quoted from Ronca 1992: 57 n14; my translation). Cf. also the opinion of Chantepie de la Saussaye (1871: 91-92, note 4) that the Ciceronian etymology would never have been in doubt but for Christian biases. In his view, the etymology proposed by Lactantius (cf. below note 45) should be unreservedly rejected.

[27] Feil 1986: 46-48

[28] Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1: 117 (quoted in Smith 1964: 186-187 n17)

[29] Cicero, *De divinatione* (72: 148): *nec vero (id enim diligenter intellego) superstitione tollenda religio tollitur*, 'but it should be understood well that by removing [and destroying] superstition, worship is not destroyed' (quoted in Ronca 1992: 51, 58-59 n38; my translation).

[30] Cf. below for this modern notion.

[31] On agnostic and atheist tendencies in early Greek philosophy, cf. Van der Horst 1999

came contestable, and began indeed to be contested, as soon as aspects of it began to be articulated in the terms *religio[sus]* and *superstitiosus* under the impetus of the (partly controlled, partly uncontrolled) increase of 'religious pluralism' in Rome during, and after, that war.[32] This socio-genetics does not, however, amount to a causal explanation. The Roman concepts of *religio* and *superstitio* are the contingent outcome of two centuries of a highly specific cultural development.

[32] Cf. Smith (1964: 24-25) and Despland (1979: 12, 15-22, 27-34)

Patristic polemics

The socio-genetics of the Patristic phase was likewise a polemical one, i.e. that between an empire in decline and a 'militant monotheism'[33] on the rise. It produced developments in the semantic history of *religio* that were as contingent as were those in ancient Rome.

Early in the 2nd century CE, when the Roman Empire was still strong, officers of the imperial government noticed the massive growth of the Christian congregations in Asia Minor. They denounced this cult as a new, depraved, immoderate, ruinous and evil superstition in their reports,[34] and advised that it be suppressed.[35] Traianus [**471**] (98-117), however, refused to permit the persecution of Christians unless they were defiant enough to resist publicly the claim that they too should participate in the rituals of the state if they were ordered to do so.[36]

This conflict between the state and the Christian congregations was inherent in the state being responsible for the welfare of the state by the *cultus deorum*, and the Christians refusing to participate in them when they were ordered to do so.[37] Even so, Rome's general policy of non-interference in the religious traditions of its subjects and subjected peoples caused the persecutions of Christians to remain sporadic and local during the 1st, 2nd and early 3rd centuries. Moreover, Greek was the language of the Christians till the mid-3rd century, and their liturgical language until the 4th. *Religio*, therefore, was a term Latin Christians were confronted with only in precisely the setting of the rare court cases brought against them for their public refusal to participate in the *religiones deorum* of the state.[38] Tertulian (ca. 160-ca. 220), himself a lawyer, argued that Christians should not be forced to participate in them on the grounds that they could not be accused of having harmed the worship of gods when it was uncertain whether or not those gods actually existed.[39]

From the mid-3rd century onwards, however, relations between the state and the Christian congregations became much tenser for a number of reasons. One was that the numbers of Christians was expanding quickly also in the western, Latin, half of the empire. Another was that these began to articulate their beliefs into doctrines, when a number of adults with a classical Roman education turned Christian.[40] A third reason was

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[33] The qualification is Ronca's (1992: 57).

[34] Plinius Minor (61-114 CE), *Epistu1ae* (10, 96: 8): *superstitio prava immodica*; Tacitus (ca. 55-116/120 CE), *Annales* (15, 44: 5): *exitiabilis superstitio*; Suetonius (75-150 CE), *De vita Caesarum: Nero* (16, 2): *genus hominum superstitio nova ac malefica*; quoted in Ronca 1992: 57 n1; 58 n35; my translations.

[35] Ronca 1992: 44, 50, 57 n1; 58 n35

[36] Anonymous 1971

[37] Cf. also Bévenot (1981: 105) on the absence of the missionary drive in early Christianity.

[38] Cf. Feil 1986: 50-51, 68-70, 80-81

[39] Tertulianus, *Apologeticum* 24: *Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei, pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis*, 'For if it is not certain that the gods exist, then it is not certain either that their worship [is effective]; [but] if neither the gods nor their worship are certain, then we are certainly not guilty of having hurt [their] worship' (quoted in Feil 1986: 57, n5; my translation).

[40] Among them Tertulian (ca.160-220), his contemporary Minutius Felix, Cyprian (200/210-258), Arnobius (†327), Lactantius (250-317), and Augustine (345-430). Cf. Feil 1986: 57; Smith 1964: 27, 30.

that the Roman Empire was corrupted morally by the many contests for imperial power between its army commanders. And a fourth, finally, was that it became [**472**] militarily and financially exhausted by the continual wars on its eastern and northern borders, on which the pressure of the 'barbarians' was growing immensely. This increase of tension between the now much more numerous and more articulate Christians and the weakening state resulted in two periods of systematic persecutions of Christians. The first occurred in 250 and 257-258 under the emperors Decius (249-251) and Valerianus (253-260) after Decius had ordered all citizens to participate in the *cultus deorum* of the state. The other lasted from 304 to 310 under the co-emperors Diocletianus (284-305) and Galerius (305-311).

The first bout caused Cyprian to formulate the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'no salvation outside the church'. However, he applied it only to Christians of a different persuasion from his own, who had thereby, in his view, 'left the church'; and to lapsed Christians who had publicly participated in the *cultus deorum* of the state and had been expulsed from 'the church' for that reason. Both groups could not be saved, because, according to Cyprian, only 'the church' possessed the ritual means for salvation.[41]

The second period of persecutions caused Arnobius and Lactantius to begin to oppose 'our Christian way of worship' (*nostra religio Christiana*) to the *religiones falsae*, the 'false rituals', of the Roman state. Arnobius argued that the Christians ought not be accused of introducing 'unheard-of, unknown and superstitious' worship by the Romans, for they had themselves always been 'fathers of new ways of worship', having introduced so many ways of worship from elsewhere into Rome. He rejected the argument that Roman worship was superior because it was older, by asserting that Christian worship addressed the *deus princeps*, 'the main god': it was, therefore, 'more true, helpful, powerful and just' than any other. But he also proclaimed it as the true worship, for Christ had 'introduced the true worship into the world and opened the doors of piety to blind men living indeed in impiety'.[42]

Likewise, Lactantius considered true worship to have been instituted by God and 'transferred to the peoples' by Christ as the 'bond of piety'(*vinculum pietatis*) by which God had bound man to himself, [**473**] and man was bound to God, and from which 'the name of *religio* is derived'.[43] He held that the virtue of *religio* had been instilled in all men, either by God as *religio dei verae et sanctae*, 'the true and holy worship of God', or by the gods as *religiones vanae et falsae*, 'vain and false rituals'.[44] He rejected Cicero's etymology of *religio* from *religere*/*relegere*, because Cicero had regarded the childless couples who were anxious to obtain offspring and carefully performed rituals,

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[41] Cf. Cyprianus, *Epistulae* 73, 21 (quoted in Bakhuizen van den Brink 1973); Bévenot 1981: 97-105.
[42] Cf. Arnobius, *Adversus nationes*, 2, 72; 2, 67; quoted in Smith 1964: 188-189 n21/26; Feil 1986: 58-60 n10-12; my translations.
[43] Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum liber I-VII* 2, 1; 2,3; 4, 28; quoted in Smith 1964: 190-191 n30/32; Feil 1986: 62, n27; Lactantius, *Epitome institutionum divinarum* 25, 30; 36, 41; 64, 5; quoted by Smith 1964: 183 n5, 190 n30; Ronca 1992: 59, n43-44..
[44] Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum liber I-VII* 2, 3; 3, 1; 3, 10; references in Feil 1986: 63 n22.

even several times on one day, as superstitious. According to his own etymology, Cicero, he said, should have regarded them as very 'religious'. Lactantius, instead, deduced *religio* from *religare*, God having 'rebonded' man to himself.[45]

He shifted thereby the concept of worship from the Roman one as the careful response to what was perceived to be a continuous stream of revelatory messages from the gods, to Christian worship as the response to God's 'once-only revelation in Christ'. It was precisely in the 4th century, that revelation began to be conceived as the uniquely and exclusively true 'revelation', as complete, closed and universally valid, to which nothing could be added and from which nothing should be subtracted. In that very 4th century, it would take on the absolutist and exclusivist features of a Christian state supported orthodoxy, by means of the Christian 'scriptures' being canonised as the sole yardstick of 'correct' doctrine.[46]

By 313, when Lactantius' book appeared, the *corpus Christianorum*, the Christian community, had already been granted permission to leave the *secta patrum*, i.e. the traditional cultic community of the followers of the [ways of the] forefathers.[47] That departure was granted them by imperial decrees, firstly by the emperors Galerius in 311, [**474**] and again by Constantine (306-337) and Licinius (308-324) in 313. These permitted them to follow their own *observantia* in matters of worship. Throughout the 4th century, the term *religio* remained of little significance for Latin Christians: it was solely an expression of their confrontation with the Roman state over the *cultus deorum* in the previous centuries.[48]

In the late 4th century, the Roman Empire, especially its Western Latin half, came under increasingly severe pressure from the westward migrations of the Germanic peoples. In 380, Theodosius (379-395) ordered all his subjects by decree to practise the Christian worship only. In 392, he forbade the *cultus deorum* throughout the empire.[49] The Visigoths, Christians of the Arian persuasion, shocked the world in 410 by capturing and ransacking Rome before moving on to establish a kingdom in Aquitaine.[50] Augustine (353-430) wrote *De civitate dei* between 413 and 426 to refute the allegation that the fall of Rome was due to the suppression of the *cultus deorum* by the Christian rulers.[51]

Four conclusions may be drawn. The first is that *religio* never became a central concept in Latin Patristic Christianity: it was a concept of confrontation with the state,

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[45] Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum liber I-VII* 4, 28: *diximus nomen religionis a vinculo pietatis esse deductum quod hominem sibi deus religaverit et pietate constrixerit, quia servire nos ei ut domino et obsequi ut patri necesse est*, 'We have said that the term of religion has been deduced from the fetter of piety because God has bound man to himself again and tied him up by piety, for it is necessary that we serve him as lord and obey him as father' (quoted in Feil 1986: 63 n24/27; my translation).

[46] Cf. Platvoet 1998c. On this exclusivism, cf. also Smith 1964: 28-29; Despland 1979: 44

[47] On *secta* as a body of 'followers' in cultic matters in Patristic time, cf. Feil 1986: 56 n2, 58 n3, 64 n2-4, 78, 82

[48] Cf. Feil 1986: 50-51, 64, 68, 69 n2, 70, 80, 82

[49] Cf. Anonymous 1973; Despland 1979: 45-47

[50] Feil 1986: 68

[51] Augustinus, *De civitate dei* 4, 7: *deorum falsorum cultus sacrilegos*, 'the sacrilegious rituals for false gods'(quoted in Feil 1986: 71 n18; my translation).

not one of self-understanding. The second is that its meaning remained restricted to *cultus*, worship, and the inward attitude of 'piety due to God' on the grounds of justice.[52] The Patristic concept of *religo*, therefore, never signified the modern notion of 'religion'. The third is that the polemics of the persecutions of the 3rd and early 4th centuries caused a few Christian authors to equate the *cultus deorum* with *falsa religio(nes)*, and with *superstitio*, and their own *cultus dei* with *religio vera*, 'true worship'. The polemical Christian dichotomy of 'true' versus 'false worship' was superimposed on the ancient Roman, equally polemical, [**475**] dichotomy of *religio* (worship) versus *superstitio*.[53] It was likewise a prescriptive one, which was at first, in the 3rd and 4th centuries, directed *ad intra* only, at fellow Christians, but was used soon, from the late 4th century onwards, also *ad extra*, against non-Christians. Although the concept *religio*, therefore, was marginal for Christian self-understanding, it certainly did contribute to the establishment of boundaries between it and the *cultus deorum* of the state. A Christian identity with polemical traits emerged in the long transition of 'Christianity' from merely one of many Eastern esoteric cult groups to its establishment as the new public religion of the Roman Empire in its dying stages in the Latin West. The final conclusion is that the socio-genetics of this new phase in the meaning of the concept of *religio* is as contingent as was its first phase in republican Rome.

Medieval meanings

The etymologies of *religio* of Cicero and Lactantius remained well known through Isidorus of Sevilla (ca. 560-636),[54] in Medieval times (450-1450). Troughout this period, the concept continued to be used only in the meaning of *cultus dei*, especially in its public form, as the reverence due to God on account of 'piety', which was regarded as a sub-virtue of justice.[55] Precisely that traditional meaning of worship caused *religio* to acquire, from as early as the late 7th century onwards, an additional, typically inner-Christian meaning: that of the institution of the 'orders' of 'religious men and women', who devoted their entire life to the meticulous observation of the *cultus dei*.[56] However, when discussing 'religions' (in the modern sense) in a neutral way, scholastics did not use *religio*, but resorted three different terms. They used either *sectae*, [bodies of] 'fol-

[52] The Roman, Patristic and Scholastic (see below) notions of *pietas* (due to the state, parents and ancestors as well as to gods or God, on grounds of justice) has very different connotations from the sentimental ones of the later 'devotion to e.g. Mary', or the 'burning devotion' of the mystics towards Christ or God, as they were developed from Medieval times onwards by e.g. Saint Francis of Assisi. Roman/Patristic/-Scholastic *pietas* was not one of sentimental feeling but an inner attitude of conscientiousness, as part of a *do ut des* relationship. Cf. e.g. Feil 1986: 43-45

[53] Cf. Ronca 1992: 56-57

[54] Cf. Feil 1986: 75-76 n1; cf. also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* IIa-IIae, 81: 1; cf. also Feil 1986: 102, 107, 117, 131, 132 n3, 277

[55] Cf. Feil 1986: 75-136 *passim*; cf. also Aquinas, *Summa theologica* (IIa-IIae, 81), where he quoted Cicero, *De inventione* (2, 53): *religio est quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caeremoniamque affert*, 'worship is offering care and ritual to something superior which is called divine' (quoted in Despland 1979: 88, 113; my translation).

[56] Cf. Feil 1986: 76-137 *passim*; Despland 1979: 120

lowers',[57] or, inspired by the Latin version of a tract of Averroes/Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), [**476**] *leges*,[58], or more exceptionally, *fides*.[59] At first, they distinguished only three 'sects': the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.[60] This was later extended to six, when Roger Bacon (1220-ca. 1292) added, for astrological reasons, those of the Chaldaeans, the Egyptians, and the *secta Antichristi*, which was to appear at the end of time. Though astrology allowed only six *sectae*, because there were 'only six stellar constellations',[61] Bacon actually mentioned two more: the *secta paganorum*, the heathens, and, because of new information,[62] the *secta idolatriae*, the Buddhists, bringing the total to eight.

It may be concluded that despite an increase in information on 'religions' (in the modern meaning), *religio* remained fully within the ambit of the meaning it had in ancient Rome and in Patristic time, and so it expressed a semantic field quite different from that of the modern terms 'religion' and 'religions' .

Early modern meanings

The foundations for the major conceptual switch from the Ancient and Christian notions of *religio* to the modern ideas about 'religion' and 'religions' were laid in Western Europe in the period from 1453, when Cusanus published his *De pace fidei*, to 1756, when Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* appeared. They consist in a dense web of both 'secular' and 'religious' developments, of two kinds: one in Western Europe itself, the other in its relations with the rest of the world.

The first are those in Europe facing inward and struggling over its 'religion' (in the modern sense of the word). In chronological order, one may count among them the fall of the East Roman Empire in 1453; the humanist rediscovery of the ancient past during [**477**] the Renaissance; the religious division, divisiveness and fanaticism introduced into Europe by the Reformation; and its 'wars of religion'. But likewise the early developments of modern science, particularly in mathematics, cosmography and physics; the beginnings of the first industrial revolution; and the Enlightenment played their part in this process. As did the political revolutions in North America and France in the late 18th century. In the latter, religion began to be de-established and to be constitutionally separated from the state.

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[57] On the frequent use of *secta* as a body of 'followers' in Medieval times, cf. Feil 1986: 89-90 n4, 103 n10, 112 n4, 114 n2, 117-121 n5/6/8/15/16/21/24/27/28, 122 n4, 127.

[58] Cf. also Despland 1979: 93-95, 327-331. *Christiana lex* had already been used by Augustine as a synonym of *Christianitas* (Feil 1986: 69-70 n10); for the frequent use of *lex* as a synonym of *secta* after 1250, cf. Feil 1986: 103 n10, 112 n7, 117 n5, 118 n8/14, 120, 121, 122 n3, 124 n8, 127; Despland 1979: 117-118; on its neutrality, cf. Feil 1986: 274-275.

[59] Feil 1986: 112 n4, 113 n9, 115-116 n2-5

[60] Feil 1986: 113 n9; Despland 1979: 119-120

[61] Cf. Feil 118 n8/9

[62] Franciscan friars had been sent by the Pope and the French King to Karakorum, the capital of the Chan of the Mongolians in 1246 and 1253. They had reported on their journeys in 1247 and 1256. As a Franciscan friar, Francis Bacon was aware of the contents of their travelogues. Cf. also Despland 1979: 117

The second are those *ad extra*, in Western Europe as facing outward and gradually mastering, and becoming the master of, the world. Elements in this process were the voyages of discovery, the European colonisation of the Americas, and the growing strength of Europe's mercantilist trade to the Far East. But also its gold, slave and other trade to Africa, the early propagation of the Christian religion by the religious orders of the Roman Catholic church (which was unsuccessful everywhere except in Latin America), Europe's plantation economy in the Americas, and the beginnings of its later colonial empires.

Both groups of developments were crucial in the formation of the modern concepts of 'religion' and 'religions'. Those *ad intra*, by establishing numerous religious bodies in Europe, many of them dissenting and distinct from the 'established' one before that began to become de-established itself. Those *ad extra*, by considerably increasing, in however biased and bigoted ways, Europe's knowledge of, and manifold interests in, the rest of the world, not only in terms of its geography, products and markets, but also in those of its peoples and their societies, cultures, and 'religions'.

It is, however, equally true that the semantic switch itself was made only after 1750. Europeans remained loyal, to an astonishing degree, to the pre-modern meaning(s) of *religio* and (its successor) 'religion' until the very eve of the American and French revolutions, as Feil and Harrison have shown.[63] Within the compass of this article, I can only trace the semantic developments on this threshold in a bare outline.

Another important development was initiated by the Renaissance humanists. They began to distinguish between the many ways of *religio*, 'worship', at the manifest level and at a basic level. At the latter level, said Nicolas Cusanus (1401-1464), *religio*, 'worship', was [**478**] *connata* with men, and necessarily directed towards the cult of the one God. The worship of the one God was, therefore, implicit in all polytheistic worship, and ultimately 'there is but one worship in the variety of rituals'.[64] Although atrocities had been committed against the Christians by the Turks during the capture of Byzantium, Cusanus argued that the 'peace of the faith' and 'concord in the ways of worship' (*concordia religionum*) could have been established. It required that

> all those who worship several gods would but have considered what they presuppose, to wit the deity who is the cause of everything, and would but have assumed it, as reason itself dictates, into their manifest worship, as they implicitly serve it in all those whom they call gods'.[65]

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[63] Feil 1986: 138-281; 1992a; 1992; Harrison 1990

[64] Nicolas Cusanus, *De pace fidei* (1, 7): *non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate* (quoted in Feil 1986: 141; my translation).

[65] Cusanus, *De pace fidei* (6, 16f): *Si [...] omnes qui plures deos venerantur respexerint ad id quod praesupponunt, scilicet ad deitatem quae est causa omnium, et illam uti ratio ipsa dictat in religionem manifestam assumpserint, sicut ipsam implicite colunt in omnibus quos deos nominant, [lis est dissoluta*, the strife is dissoved] (quoted in Feil 1986: 144 n20; my translation).

If diversity [of worship] could not, or should not, be removed, it could at least augment devotion in order that 'worship may be one and one [also] the cult of [devout] service'.[66] Cusanus insisted also that, if the polytheists would convert to the true worship established by Christ, they would not find another faith, but recover the one that had always been theirs.[67]

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) also postulated that the worship of God was natural to man, although he conceived it very much as an intellectual affair. Humans were different from animals, he argued, because they had been capable, from earliest times, of the 'contemplation of things divine', possessed a soul that was 'inclined to become God', and had originally practised a common worship in which God had preserved the original link with wisdom.[68] The worship of God was, therefore, as natural to man as was barking to a dog and neighing to a horse.[69] Though it was, therefore, an 'instinct common and natural to all peoples', it had degenerated by being turned over to profane men. It had been preserved integrally only in [**479**] the worship of Moses and Christ, not in that of the Jews who had killed Christ, nor in that of the Muslims and Gentiles, whose vile superstitions, sordid absurdities, and obscene fables he denounced.[70] Despite the pride of men and the cunning of the demons, they could be redeemed from false worship by the 'diligent study of legitimate wisdom'.[71] Gian Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1469-1533) and Desiderius Erasmus (1466 or 1469-1536) likewise regarded worship as a 'notion' or 'power' inborn in all humans, the true version of which was found only in Christianity.[72]

These Renaissance humanists, therefore, remained within the ambit of the narrow meanings of the traditional concept of *religio*. It was not, however, a key term for them.[73] It remained basically the virtue of the *pietas verae religionis*, i.e. Christian worship. Only in Christian worship was the *religio una in rituum varietate* manifest.[74] The humanists regarded the rest as the superstitious cult of idols.[75] They were traditional also in using *sectae*[76] as well as *leges*,[77] when referring to 'religions' (in the modern meaning) in a neutral and descriptive way,[78] and by referring to religious orders as *religiones*.[79]

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[66] Cusanus, *De pace fidei* 1, 7; 6, 16; 7, 19; 16, 56; 19, 62f; cf. Feil 1986: 141-147, 156-159; my translations.
[67] Cusanus, *De pace fidei* 4, 11; quoted in Feil 1986: 146 n30; my translation.
[68] Cf. Feil 1986: 194 n13, 195-207 *passim*
[69] Harrison 1990: 13, 179 n32
[70] Cf. Feil 1986: 194-206 *passim*
[71] Cf. Feil 1986: 195-206 *passim*
[72] Cf. Feil 1986: 214-216, 218-219
[73] Feil 1986: 210, 211, 212, 213, 221, 226 275
[74] Cf. Feil 1986: 210, 215-216, 218-230, 232, 234
[75] Cf. Feil 1986: 210, 211, 214-216, 216-217, 228-229, 231
[76] Cf. Feil 1986: 140-156 *passim*, 157, 159, 199, 208, 212, 220, 225-226; 228-229, 230; 233, 279-280
[77] Cf. Feil 1986: 142-148, 161-162, 165, 175, 199, 204, 207-208, 209-211, 214, 217, 225-228, 223, 279-280; Despland 1979: 143, 151, 330-331
[78] Erasmus also used the terms *Christianismus, Judaismus*, and *paganismus*, when discussing these 'religions'; cf. Feil 1986: 220, 222, 234.
[79] Cf. Feil 1986: 155, 214, 219, 220-222

Certain shifts, however, were becoming apparent. *Religio*, as a virtue, was no longer presented as a subdivision of justice but as a virtue in itself in being *connata* with man. The way Ficino formulated humankind's common *religio* paved the way for the later concepts of a 'natural religion' common to all men.[80] *Religio*, though never the meta-concept within which *fides* was included, also began to be used parallel with it and other terms, as well as to acquire the wider semantic connotation of referring likwise to communities of worship(pers).[81]

[**480**] Other developments in the semantic field of *religio* resulted from the intra-Christian polemics of the 16th and 17th centuries. The reformers as well as the Cambridge Platonists[82] adopted the strategy of 'paganopapism',[83] initiated by Luther in order to show that the idolatry of the heathens was no different from that of the Catholics.[84] Calvin and Luther accepted that some natural knowledge of God was inscribed into the hearts of all men,[85] but that natural knowledge had been corrupted by the warped minds of men and had produced only idolatry as the worship common to men. As Christianity had been infested with, and corrupted by, natural knowledge through Greek philosophy, the papists were truly pagans, for 'pagan philosophy naturally degenerated into idolatry, polytheism, and finally atheism'.[86] In this manner, major portions of what until then had been counted as *christiana lex*, or *Christi fides et religio*, to wit the 'papists' and the 'fanatics' (mainly the Anabaptists), were incorporated into the domain of *idolatria*, *superstitio*, and *des Teufels Religion*, 'worship as devised by the Devil'. Thereby, they were excluded from 'the church' and 'salvation'.[87] Said Luther: 'Outside Christ, all ways of worship are idols'.[88]

Being allergic to most of the traditional forms of Christian worship, the reformers reduced it to the expression of the 'one correct faith' and its internalisation by the 'true' believers.[89] *Religio*, in its traditional narrow meaning of the public *cultus dei*, *Gottes-*

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[80] Cf. Feil 1986: 206; Harrison 1990: 13-14

[81] Cusanus, *De pace fidei* (13: 40): *Nonne paene omnis religio – Iudaeorum, Christianorum, Arabum et aliorum plurimorum hominum – tenet …?*, 'Does not nearly every way of worship – of the Jews, the Christians, the Arabs and most other men – hold …?'; quoted in Feil 1986: 144 n. 22 (my translation); cf. also 142-148, 156-157, 165; also 181-184 (on Bessarion), 187 (on Gazes), 190, 209, 233 (on Pico della Mirandola); Feil 1992a: 646.

[82] Cf. Harrison 1990: 28-60

[83] Harrison (1990: 6-10, 110, 144-146, 164, 177-178 n16/21-23, 229 n94) defines 'paganopapism' as the strategy of pressing other 'religions' (in the modern meaning) into the service of the contests between Christian factions in Europe. The term itself first appeared in 1675.

[84] Harrison 1990: 144

[85] On Luther, cf. Harrison 1990: 8, 177-178 n13-16. Calvin held that all men 'retain a seed of religion', therefore, 'from the beginning of the world, […] a sense of divinity is inscribed into the hearts of all' (my translation). Cf. Feil 1986: 261-263; Harrison 1990: 8; Ratschow 1992: 643

[86] Cf. Harrison 1990: 8-9, 144, 177-178 n9-22, 229 n94-96; Feil 1986: 240-242, 244-245, 263-264 n33

[87] Cf. Feil 1986: 235, 238-243 *passim*

[88] M. Luther, *Ad Galatas* (1531/1535) 110: *Extra Christum omnes religiones sunt idola* (quoted in Feil 1986: 241 n29; my translation)

[89] Cf. Feil 1986: 238, 244 n46, 248, 257, 264, 271; Ratschow 1992: 643

dienst, became thereby closely identified with *fides*, 'faith'. That reduced worship [**481**] to its doctrinal dimension: the confession, celebration and inculcation of faith.[90]

Two other developments were crucial. One was that outside the disputes between the theologians and scholars, the modern loan word 'religion' (and in German also the term *Gottesdienst*) began to become important in the 16th century.[91] That happened precisely at the time when Europe was being divided politically into Protestant and Catholic nations. These, in their turn, were split up, in addition, into a religious majority and several minorities, each with its own version of the Christian doctrine and worship. The worship was either public, if it was that of the majority, or semi-public, if it was a tolerated minority, or secret if it was *non grata*. The other was that, as the religious orders disappeared from the Protestant nations, *religio*/religion could now serve also to refer – if only occasionally and especially in political contexts and popular speech – to the contending religious factions in a society.[92] It thus began to serve as a synonym of *secta*/-sect,[93] *fides*/faith,[94] and *confessio*/confession.[95] Collectively, they foreshadowed later uses when the by then clearly distinct religious communities in a society began to be referred to as the various Christian 'churches', or more recently in an even more neutral way, as 'denominations'. It was precisely in these contexts that the semantic field of the term *religion*/religion began to widen and its denotation became much more imprecise.[96]

Towards the modern notions of 'religion' and 'religions'

In the increasingly imprecise term *religio*/'religion', however, the Ciceronian notion of the conscientiously performed worship due to God, or gods, remained the core connotation throughout the 17th and early 18th centuries, especially when the term was used in the singular. For example, Willem Bosman served as *factor* (merchant) of the Dutch WIC (West Indian Company) in its huge stone castles on [**482**] the Gold Coast between 1688 and 1702. In his descriptions of the Africans he was trading with, he referred to the 'publick and solemn exercises of religion' which he regularly witnessed.[97] In addition, but much more seldom, he spoke of the 'several religions of the Negroes', by which he meant 'the numerous and different sorts of the religion of the negroes', as he found them to differ between the different towns and even between private families.[98] Feil likewise has found, for the period till 1700, that *religio*/religion continued to refer

[90] Cf. Feil 1986: 238-242, 247-251, 254, 257, 258, 259-260, 263-264
[91] Cf. Feil 1986: 235-271, *passim*; 1997: 18-19, 94-95, *passim*
[92] Cf. Feil 1986: 243 n43/44, 250-251, 252, 264-264, 269. Ratschow (1992: 642-643), however, holds that Luther was already using the concept 'religions' in a way that fully replaces that of the medieval *secta*.
[93] Cf. Feil 1986: 243 n42, 275; 1992a: 646
[94] Cf. Feil 1986 250-251, 258, 266-267 n1-3
[95] Cf. Feil 1968: 268-269
[96] Cf. Feil 1986: 269, 270, 271-272; cf. also Ratschow 1992: 643
[97] Bosman 1705^{1}/1967^{4}: 145, 153; also 146 ('publick religion and worship'), 148, 150 ('religion' as 'religious worship'), 156 ('religiously observed holy-days'), 'the religion of the Guineans' as 'image-worship [… of] thousands of idols' and 'horrid superstition'.
[98] Bosman 1705^{1}/1967^{4}: 145-146

primarily to 'the basically concrete character of the meticulousness of [cultic] actions in respect of God'.[99] Voltaire (1694-1778) also saw 'the simple adoration of God' as the 'most ancient and most extensive' form of (theist/deist) religion and as the core of all other religions, no matter how much these had been corrupted by revelation and priest craft.[100] Hume (1711-1779) regarded 'idolatrous worship' as the core of polytheism, humankind's earliest and widest spread religion. It was the result of the ubiquitous anxieties of humans, particularly of early 'uninstructed mankind', about unknown causes. He regarded the 'incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind' as to how capricious gods would affect the insecure future of men, as the superstitious source and core of all later 'religious systems of mankind'.[101]

'Religions', however, began to serve in this period as only one of initially three, and later two alternatives for referring to the 'religious systems' of mankind.[102] *Lex* and *leges*, and its modern successors in French, were also used, albeit sparingly, until 1616 by Vives (1493-1540), Cardano (1501-1576), Bodin (1529/30-1596), Duplessis-Mornay [**483**] (1549-1623) and Vanini (1584-1619).[103] After that, this use of *lex* seems to have virtually disappeared from the vocabulary of West European scholars.[104]

The use of *sectae*, however, remained more persistent as the set term for referring in a neutral way to 'religions' as identifiable systems of beliefs and bodies of adherents in societies and history.[105] This standard division of religions was the fourfold one of the *secta Iudaeorum*, the *secta Christi* or *Christianorum*, the *secta Mahumetica* or *Mahumetis*, and the *secta Paganorum*, i.e. the bodies of the followers of Moses, Christ and Muhammad, and the collective of the 'pagan' religions.[106] An interesting, late, example, which also seems to mark the definite transition from 'sects' to (modern) 'religions', is 'the first compendium of world religions', published by Hannah Arends (1755-1832) in Boston in 1774. The title of its first edition was: *An alphabetical compendium of the various sects which have appeared in the world since the beginning of the Christian era*. However, when its second edition appeared in London in 1815, its title ran: *A dictionary*

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[99] Feil 1992a; 1992b: 37, 41-42; 1997: 337, *passim*. And even after 1700 in e.g. the works published by Christian Wolff between 1736 and 1753; cf. Feil's contribution to this volume.

[100] Despland 1979: 424-429

[101] Hume 1756[1]/1993: 160; 139-144, 153, 159, 182-185. On Hume's explanation of religion, cf. Preuss 1987: 84-103; Harrison 1990: 169-172

[102] Smith (1964: 43, 223 n132, 224 n134) found the 'perhaps first use of the phrase "the religions of the world"' in Latin in 1508 in Johannes Stamler's *Dyalogus … de diversarum gencium et mundi religionibus*, and probably its first use in a modern European language in an Italian translation of Stamler's dialogue which Smith found in the British Museum general catalogue; on Stamler, cf. also Feil 1997: 211-214.

[103] Cf. Feil 1986: 275, 279-281; 1992a: 34; 1992b: 647; 1997: 17-18, 28-33, 60-61, 65, 85-87, 213, 240, 263-264, 313, 338; Preuss 1987: 11

[104] For possible later exceptions, cf. Harrison (1992: 74) on the deist Charles Blount, writing in 1695 on 'there be[ing] but three Laws' (of Moses, Christ and Muhammad); Feil (1986: 275; 1997: 50, 67-69) on a line in Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*; Despland 1979: 445.

[105] Cf. Feil 1997: 27, 65-66, 72, 139-144, 211-214, 246, 264, 266

[106] Cf. e.g. Despland 1979: 248, 292-293, 330-331; Harrison 1990: 39, 191-192 n86-88.

of all religions and religious denominations, ancient and modern, Jewish, Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian; also of ecclesiastical history.[107]

This long use of *sectae*/'sects' for the purpose of referring to 'religions' (in the modern meaning) in a neutral way is remarkable in view of the fact that 'sect' has now lost this neutral meaning altogether. It has now acquired the quite different, and quite pejorative, meaning of a body of 'sectaries'.[108] It now refers to those 'religious fanatics' who are regarded to have cut themselves off (from the Latin *secare*, 'to cut off', *sectus*, 'cut off') from the main, or established body of religious believers, because they are 'infatuated' with their 'separatist', 'power-greedy' leader and his 'peculiar', if not 'pernicious', teaching. Its predominantly positive use until 1800, is even more curious [**484**] bearing in mind the fact that the modern negative meaning seems to have been one of its possible connotations and uses from very early on. Isidorus of Sevilla (560-636) already referred to 'sectarians' as the 'heretical followers of a bad master'.[109] Its modern meaning seems also to have been intended by Petrus Venerabilis (1094-1156) when he wrote his *Liber contra sectam sive haerisim saracenorum* ('The Book against the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens'),[110] as well as by Thomas Aquinas in his discussion of Islam in Spain.[111] Except for these few instances, this pejorative use is but sparsely documented before 1800. Those that have been documented after Wycliff (1328-1384) seem all to refer to inner-Christian divisions and factions.[112]

One may conclude, therefore, that, the denotation of 'sect' shifted quickly, completely and radically from its neutral to its polemical meaning as soon as the plural 'religions' had acquired its modern monopoly on referring to what Hume termed 'the religious systems of mankind'.[113] 'Sect' began to refer exclusively, on the basis of its other etymology, to a very different meaning, imposed strategically on quite a different set of phenomena in quite another geographical setting. It no longer referred to the bodies of followers of 'religions' or schools of philosophy in a descriptive and neutral way in a *supra*-Western context. 'Sect' now denoted exclusively a Christian faction in mainly the Protestant nations of Western Europe, whose 'secession' from an established 'mother church' was resented, and which was usually regarded as a group of dangerous religious fanatics.

Two more factors that have contributed to the plural 'religions' taking over completely, first from *leges*, and then also from *sectae*/'sects', in the neutral meaning, may still be briefly mentioned: 'history of religions', and theories of religious pathology.

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[107] Cf. Cornille 1994: 12, 16 n1.
[108] Cf. Hume (1776[1]/1993: 6): 'Whig and Tory, churchman and sectary, freethinker and religionist, patriot and courtier united in their rage against [me]'.
[109]. Isidorus of Sevilla, *Etymologiae* 8, 3; quoted in Despland 1979: 118 n116.
[110] Cf. Despland 1979: 116 n113; Feil (1997: 263) refers to it as *Summula brevis contra … sectam diabolicae fraudis Saracenorum,* 'A brief abstract against … the sect of the diabolical fraud of the Saracens'. Others refer to it as *Adversus nefandam sectam Saracenorum*, 'Against the criminal sect of the Saracens' (Anonymous 1974).
[111] Despland 1979: 118, 329
[112] Cf. Despland 1979: 137, 279, 281-282; Feil 1997: 107-108, 121, 141-142, 256
[113] Hume 1756/1993: 160

Firstly, from 1548 onwards, publications began to appear that described a greater diversity of 'religions' than the traditional four *leges* or *sectae* could accommodate. L.G. Gyraldus (1479-1552) published [**485**] his *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* in Basle in 1548.[114] In 1641, Gerard J. Vossius (1577-1649) published his *De theologia gentili et physiologia Christiana sive de origine ac progressu idolatriae* in Amsterdam.[115] Edward Brerewood's first edition of *Enquiries touching the diversity of languages and religions through the chief parts of the world* was published in London in 1613. Its fifth edition was published in London in 1674. It was translated into French and Latin, the first having three editions between 1640 and 1663, and the latter five between 1650 and 1701.[116] In 1653, Alexander Ross (1590-1654) published the first edition of his very successful *Pansebeia: or a view of all the religions of the world* (London, Printed for John Saywell, 1658^3). It had four more editions before 1700, and was translated into Dutch (1663^1, 1671^3), French (1666^1, 1669^2), and German (1667^1, 1701^2, 1717^3).[117] It was followed by the publication in Amsterdam in 1663 of *De religionis gentilium, errorumque apud eos causis* by Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), which had two more editions in Latin in 1665 and 1700, and was translated into English in 1705.[118] Tobias Pfanner (1641-1716) published his *Systema theologiae gentilis purioris* in 1679.[119] In that same year, the *Demonstratio evangelica* of P.-D. Huet (1630-1721) appeared in Paris also. He regarded the ancient religions, from Egypt to Rome, as offshoots from the teachings of Moses in the Pentateuch.[120] They were followed in 1695 by the ambitious *The history of all religions in the world, from the creation down to the present time*, by William Turner.[121] Though 'religions' were still viewed as 'mutually exclusive sets of beliefs and practices' and described by these authors in order to refute and reject them,[122] the impact of their publications nonetheless slowly began to make the traditional division of human 'religions' into the four 'sects' obsolete.

Secondly, 'paganopapism' produced a number of 'natural' explanations of why original man's primitive monotheism, as he was [**486**] believed to have practised it before the 'fall', had degenerated into the 'despicable superstition' common to pagans and papists in historical times. One of them[123] was in terms of the religious pathology,[124] which in its turn produced a 'natural history' of superstition. In 1709, John Trenchard observed in an essay, entitled *The Natural History of Superstition*, that pagans, papists, Protestants and Muslims alike had all been duped into believing all impostors in matters

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[114]. Cf. Feil 1997: 75-76; Lorenz 1992: 645
[115] Cf. Lorenz 1992: 645-646; Harrison 1990: 258; de Vries 1967: 25-26
[116] Harrison 1990: 39, 191 n86; Smith 1964: 224 n133
[117] Cf. Lorenz 1992: 645-646; Harrison 1990: 191-192 n86; Smith 1964: 224-225 n133, 135
[118] Cf. Smith 1964: 224 n133; on Herbert of Cherbury, cf. Harrison 1990: 61-73, *passim*
[119] Lorenz 1992: 645-646
[120] Lorenz 1992: 644-646;Harrison 1990: 137, 226 n44; de Vries 1967: 26-27
[121] Harrison 1990: 191-192 n86-87
[122] Harrison 1990: 40; Smith 1964: 43
[123] On other explanations in terms of admixture of peoples, travel and climate, cf. Harrison 1990: 105-120. These 'natural' explanations, and the pathological ones, were additional to the traditional theological ones by human sinfulness and the delusions of the devil; cf. e.g. Harrison 1990: 100-104.
[124] Cf. Harrison 1990: 120-126

of religion throughout human history. He argued that that had been the case because there was 'something innate in our Constitution [that] made us easily […] susceptible of wrong Impressions, subject to panic Fears, and prone to Superstition and Error'.[125]

With a radically different intent, Hume applied this theory in 1756 in his *The Natural History of Religion* to any and every religion. He wrote that religions result from the pathology of the anxieties and fears of the feverish minds of men worried by their uncertain futures and death.[126] He was convinced that

> the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world […] are any thing but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps […] the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape [rather] than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational.[127]

In conclusion

The semantic history of *religio*/religion(s) proves to be a complex, contingent, arbitrary and selective one. At any one moment of the two thousand years I have surveyed in bare outline, only one, or a few, of the numerous dense aspects of what Westerners now refer to as 'religion', or (other) 'religions', were actually articulated in this concept, and in a few other ones. This particular history has shown in addition that much of whatever was actually expressed in terms and concepts, acquired these shapes often by polemics, i.e. in contexts of contest over 'religion'. Over and above that shifting and [**487**] contingent articulation of some of these aspects, 'religion' and 'religions' are, however, dense prototypical sets of meanings and functions. By our social and lexical intuition we fairly easily grasp in them those familiar traits which we minimally need for ordinary communication in our daily affairs. That intuition and use has, however, been moulded and conditioned by the 'traditional (mainline) religion at home', especially as it was 'of late', rather than by the diversity of the 'alien' religions abroad and at home, especially of long ago or newly devised. Our understanding – be it intuitive, or to some degree and in certain aspects articulated – of the 'religions' of humankind in all their actual diversity is severely curtailed by us being culturally, conceptually and terminologically conditioned by our mainline 'religion' at home.

I need, therefore, to supplement my diachronic analysis of the contingent semantic history of *religio*/'religion(s)' with an attempt to indicate the huge synchronic diversity of human 'religions'. As I cannot possibly do that by descriptions of the innumerable single 'religions' of humankind, I can only give some impression of their diversity by ordering them into three distinctly different kinds, two of which are prototypically unfamiliar to us, in terms of our 'intuitive' concepts.

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[125] Trenchard 1709/1751: 380; quoted in Harrison 1990: 169
[126] Cf. above note 101
[127] Hume 1756/1993: 184.

Three groups of 'religions'

> La réalité historique ne connaît qu'une pluralité de religions et non 'la religion' […]. Il faut, en revanche, posséder, pour parler de 'religions', même au pluriel, un concept unique de la religion, mais abstrait, comme le concept d'arbre, alors qu'il n'existe pourtant aucun arbre qui ne soit un arbre particulier.[128]

The earliest evidence on human religiosity discovered so far, is the grave of a young girl in the Border Cave in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa,[129] which has been dated at 103,000 BP.[130] From then until now, three distinctly different groups of 'religions' have appeared. I term them, for the moment, the non-doctrinal community religions, the doctrinal transnational religions of the first axial age, and the [**488**] synthetic religions of the second axial age.[131] After I have outlined them, I will give some further indications of the diversity of human religions.

The non-doctrinal community religions

My oldest group of human religions dates back far beyond the grave of that Neanderthal girl: its origins and early developments are hidden in the mists of anthropo-genesis.[132] It consists of the numerous 'community religions' that together, as a group, can claim to have the longest religious history of humankind. In consists of several subtypes. One are the 'preliterate' religions, the oldest one of which are those of the tiny bands of food gatherers. They have existed from palaeolithic times till now, with only a few of them remaining on the verge of extinction. The younger kind of preliterate religions has existed since neolithic times. They are those of the somewhat larger societies of the early food producers, whether by animal husbandry or by shifting agriculture, of the past and of the present. A third, and again younger kind, are those of societies with more sophisticated food production, often by the use of irrigation, growing numbers of people, towns, states, expansion of trade, early literacy and the earliest religious texts. From then till now, these 'community religions' have a number of traits in common.

One is that they are unarticulated, open and receptive systems of beliefs and practices. Another is that they employ dense, complex, polyphonic, multi-media symbol

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[128] Brelich (1970: 6): 'Historical reality knows only a plurality of religions, and no 'religion' […]. Nonetheless, to be able even to speak of 'religions' in the plural, one must possess a unique (i.e. an overarching, JP) but abstract concept of religion, like the concept of 'tree', even though there is no tree which is not a specific tree'.

[129] On this archaeological document, cf. Platvoet 1996: 49, note 15

[130] BP: 'before [the] present'.

[131] I have dealt in greater detail with this long term development in Platvoet 1989, 1993, 1998c.

[132] Krüger's suggestion that 'religion co-emerged with humanity itself' and had already reached 'a fair level of articulation' with *Homo erectus*, *i.e.*, more than 1 million years ago (Krüger 1995: 157), seems too bold a speculation and one inspired by his Whiteheadian view of man as *homo religiosus*; cf. Platvoet 1998d.

systems in their religious rituals for their (postulated)[133] communication with an often densely populated (postulated) world of unseen beings, powers and qualities in this, and/or in (postulated) meta- and intra-empirical, realms.[134] Again [**489**] another is that these religions, and the other institutions governing life in their societies, are ruled by 'multi-stranded thought'.[135] In that type of thought – which governs much of ordinary social life in Western societies also –, meanings and functions are 'conflated' by the predominant use of seemingly simple, but actually complex symbols, the dense meanings of which most often resist articulation, analysis and reflection. They are much used in rituals, 'religious' as well as 'secular', for ordering the social life of a group because they produce deferential behaviour in its members – effects which they also have on us, modern Westerners, in most of our ordinary daily social life.[136] They often operate by expressing key social relationships (*e.g.*, male-female, parent-child, ruler-subject) by pairing such symbols into sets that are 'structurally' opposed (e.g. the bride in white *versus* the widow in black), for they intimate the social relations and behaviour that are 'proper' in a society. These dense symbolic complexes, therefore, not only serve as the polyphonic, multimedia means of communication, but also condition and constrain it as a system of mainly unconscious controls governing social behaviour.[137]

As the religions of this group are ruled by multi-stranded thought only, they normally completely lack articulation of, and reflection on, their beliefs by all, or virtually all, of their believers.[138] That implies three other distinctive traits. One is that the cognitive contents of their beliefs are not reflected upon. Another that these religions are not connected to a reflective code of ethical behaviour. And the third that specific beliefs are consciously present in the minds of the believers only when activated by the situations in life which require them. For the rest, they remain 'submerged': the beliefs [**490**] are either activated by specific situations or unavailable, being stored in sub-liminal personal and collective memories.[139]

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[133] I use 'postulated' as an *etic* (or technical) term for 'non-verifiable/non-falsifiable' by the methods of modern science. The believers of precisely this group of religions, whatever their other doubts, do not explicitly postulate, but normally assume as self-evident that they communicate with 'unseen' beings when they, *e.g.*, address them.

[134] For a detailed investigation into one of them, cf. Platvoet 1995a, and Platvoet 1999a.

[135] See Gellner 1988: 43-53, 76-79, 172; Platvoet 1998c: 110-112

[136] Cf. Platvoet 1995c: 31-37, especially 35-36

[137] On symbolic complexes ruling ritual and other behaviour, cf. Platvoet 1995c; for particular examples, cf. Platvoet 1995b, 1999a: 21-26, 34-41

[138] It is, of course, very problematic that our culturally biased instruments of analysis force us to write about these religions in negative terms. This can only be remedied by descriptions of them as they operate in their own settings. These demonstrate that their 'lack' of articulation constitutes no drawback at all but rather provides them with an effective means of religious socialisation. Geertz (1966: 4, 24-40; 1973: 90, 109-123) has expressed this effect well by defining 'religions' as symbol systems that establish long-lasting moods and motivations in their believers that seem uniquely realistic to them because of the aura of factuality with which they clothe the general order of existence they establish.

[139] I am concerned here with the rule and not with the exception. That rule is established and forcefully maintained by the institutions of these societies which have no need of the articulation of concepts; and so also by their religions. Ethnographers have often met with the exception, the occasional 'philosophically inclined' informant. Reflecting with the anthropologist on the submerged belief system was for them a

Another marked trait of this large group of 'religions' is their lack of institutional articulation and separation: instead of having developed into a distinct institute (as in modern Western societies), they have remained fused with the other, or some other, institutions within their own societies. In the case of some of the demographically bigger ones, a rudimentary, incipient and partial institutionalisation may be discerned. And in that of the very big community religions such as 'Hinduism',[140] an institutionalisation of a very different kind from the Western one occurred. It is, therefore, a fairly general trait of this group of religions that 'religion' is mostly 'merely' a dimension, or aspect, of the several other domain(s) of society which have become distinct institutions in Western societies since modern time: the social, socio-structural, economical, political, legal, martial, public, private, therapeutic, etc. Merging into the other domains of social and public life, the 'visibility' – material, institutional, conceptual or linguistic – of the 'community religions' is usually also very limited, and in as far as they are visible, they usually have shapes different from the one we are used to. Terms and concepts denoting 'religion' are nearly always absent from the languages of these societies and from the minds of their believers. In the few cases in which terms and concepts are available, they have very different denotations and connotations.

Precisely because these societies may, therefore, be said, from a Western analytical perspective, to be 'pervasively religious' – 'religion' being dispersed over a society's other 'institutions' in the perception of the Western observer –, 'religion' is usually hardly perceptible in [**491**] them.[141] It can only be indicated as a element of their life and society by our analysis.[142] It is constituted as an object of our research by us, Western scholars, applying to their cultures the heuristic instruments which we have developed on the basis of our own cultural and cognitive developments in the matter of 'religion' and 'the religions' in the past three centuries. It is we who constitute these 'religions' in analogy to 'religion' and 'religions' in modern Western societies.

The transforming effects of such an 'academic constitution' of a religion, from one submerged in 'life' to one made visible by our description and analysis, and presented by us in print, upon its perception by the believers are, of course, huge. This is all the

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thrilling experience, precisely because their society had no need of it and offered no opportunity or support for it.

[140] A term coined by, and imposed upon the complex religious situation of the Indian subcontinent, by outsiders in the 18th century. It creates our unity in the enormously divers conglomerate of interacting Indian religious traditions. It is, however, also, in a limited measure, a self-fulfilling prophecy, for it stimulates highly politicised attempts at diminishing the inherent diversity of 'Hinduism' for the sake of desecularising the modern Indian state. Cf. Fitzgerald 1990; Platvoet 1996b; Knott 1998: 1-12, 110-118.

[141] The (romantic) conclusion, often drawn, that these societies and their members are, therefore, very 'religious', is wrong. Measured after the yardsticks of e.g. traditional Western Christian mainline religion, they should be judged to be generally rather 'irreligious', laxity being most often a structural mark of their religious observances, as is ignorance, confusion, doubt and scepticism in respect of their own beliefs.

[142] Despite the absence of 'religion' as a separate institution in these societies, virtually all ethnographies have a chapter on the 'religion' of the preliterate societies they describe, and so have introductory textbooks in anthropology. An exception is that of Bock (1969) who deals only with the religious dimensions of their social life and discusses their 'religions' only in the context of their politics, social structure, economy, technology, etc. (Bock 1969: 380; cited in Saler 1993: 28).

more the case because this process takes place at the time when these societies are being transformed by the simultaneous historical processes of colonialism, exploitation, comprehensive economical changes, mass conversion to missionary religions,[143] the spread of literacy, modern technology and vastly increased communication, and globalisation. These 'religions' cannot, in addition, be constituted unambiguously, because what we label 'religion' in those societies, analytically straddles several other Western categories, such as 'economics', 'politics', 'social structure', etc.[144]

Another prominent mark of these 'religions' is related to this predicament of their always being part of other 'domains', to wit their pragmatic utilitarianism, 'religion' serving first of all the needs of this life.[145] Yearning for a life after death, even in a heaven, and [**492**] other forms of trans-temporalism that mark the soteriologies of my second group of religions, are completely alien to, and absent from, these religions, as are many of their other remarkable features.

The doctrinal trans-national religions of the first axial age

My second group is numerically tiny. It contains but three 'religions'.[146] But they are demographically large, well articulated, conceptually systematised and unified, doctrinally closed, and cognitively strictly bounded. They are the 'multinationals' in religion: the missionary religions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam,[147] each complete with its 'Scriptures'. They are held to contain the complete, and therefore closed, 'revelation'. These 'books' serve as the canon of their faiths,[148] and are believed to found a universal and exclusive salvific claim. They emerged in Karl Jasper's 'axial age', in his reckoning between 800 and 200 BCE, and in mine between 1000 BCE and 632 CE.[149] Having de-

[143] Cf. Horton 1971, 1975; Platvoet 1996: 56-57

[144] Cf. also Saler (1993: 204) on the ambiguity of the term 'religion' when it straddles 'the normal ranges of two or more category terms', as in, e.g. 'civic religion'. He remarks that anthropologists are confronted with precisely this ambiguity in their study of the religions of preliterate societies.

[145] For a more extensive discussion of the general hallmarks of the community religions of especially preliterate societies, cf. Platvoet 1989, 1992, 1996: 51-58, 1998c: 109-115.

[146]. Historically speaking, this was a somewhat larger category. A few religions from the first axial period that 'didn't make it', such as Manicheism and Mandaeism, should also be included. As should Zoroastrianism/Parsism, that began to convert its oral body of authoritative texts into written Scriptures only late in the first millenium CE under the pressure of the political and religious conditions prevailing after the Arab conquest of Iran. Also to be included are some recent religions that have imitated the classical model of the canonical religions of the first axial age, such as Sikhism, the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj, some new Japanese religions, like Tenyiriko, as well as Baha'i, and the Mormons. Cf. Platvoet 1998c: 103-104.

[147] Saler (1993: 200) reminds us that 'Buddhism', 'Christianity', 'Islam', and any other historical 'religion', do not 'constitute monolithic and clearly bounded entities'. Rather, they are 'literary conventions' of a prototypical kind that cover, and tend to hide, the actual wide variety of 'Buddhisms', etc. They are 'best thought of as referring to *families* of religions' (Saler 1993: 208-209; his italics). Some of these are perceived by some believers (and scholars) as more 'prototypical' than others, though all are perceived as falling within a diffuse border because of 'various sorts of family resemblance'.

[148]. Cf. Platvoet 1998c: 94-102 on the limited usefulness of the Western concept of 'canon' for the comparative study of 'canonical religions'. Its 'scripto-centric' focus causes scholars to ignore the oral/aural, and other, authoritative text traditions.

[149] Cf. Platvoet 1993: 236, note 52; 1998c: 115-118. Against Jaspers, I term it 'the *first* axial age'. Although the death of Mohammed seems, at first sight, to be a fit date to conclude it, it should be remem-

veloped reflective codes of morality, they are beset by the problems of 'sin', 'evil', suffering, death, injustice, etc. in this life – or in the 'stream', *samsara*, of lives – and, if [**493**] they are monotheist, by the theodicy problem.[150] They solve it by dualist or monist soteriologies that are explicitly trans-temporal. They dissolve the felt contradiction between 'God's providence' and evil by promising some 'spiritual' (non-material) state after life, or after a long series of lives, that is free from that unbearable anomaly.

In respect of their societies, these religions have characteristically either sharply distinguished, or even segregated, themselves from them and their (other) institutions as the 'evil' or 'polluting world'. Or they have aspired to inform and reform their societies, assimilating them to some degree into their own 'unworldly' sphere by establishing a theocracy over them by which to mould them in order, in turn, not to be moulded by them.

In the modern Western societies, the (Christian) religion (of the so-called 'mainline' churches) has, like all other institutions, acquired a much more distinct profile than in earlier times mainly as the result of demographic growth, increasing complexity and institutional differentiation after 1700. As a result, that religion was increasingly perceived, also by its own believers, as distinct from other aspects of life in Western societies.[151] In addition, it has been even more sharply distinguished from society by the historically contingent process [**494**] of 'secularisation' as that developed, mentally, politically, and legally, in Western societies from the American and French revolutions onwards. It caused all religions, even the established Christian one of the mainline churches, to be perceived as institutions that ought to be set apart, and kept apart, from the other domains of modern Western societies. As a result, 'religion' was separated, usually by constitutional law, from 'the state'. This has certainly not eliminated the power and privileges of the (formerly) established religion completely, but it has reduc-

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bered that the latter part of the first axial age (roughly 100-800 CE) is the 'rush hour' of canonical Scriptures. They are the crowning part of the longer process of the production of the religions typical of the first axial age. It seems necessary, therefore, to extend that period to e.g. 700 CE or perhaps even a little further, for the canonisation processes, endemic in that time, should definitively be included in the 'first axial age' (cf. Platvoet 1998c: 99 n17, 116).

[150] Byrne offers a 'moral' definition of religion in his contribution to this volume. He propose the Geertzian theory that religions offer a theodicy to humans. They present a response to the problem of evil by means of a set of symbols which enable humans to perceive the order of reality as 'through and through moral', as 'the true order of things', and as the 'the most real' ground to which they can relate morally. From what I have said above, it may be clear that his definition does not apply to, and is no useful research instrument for, the 'community religions' discussed above. Nor does it seem to me to apply to, or to be useful in the research of, the 'synthetic religions of the second axial age' to be discussed below. But it does apply to the religions of the first axial age, at least in as far as the problem of suffering is an existential problem born from the doctrinal systematisation of these religions. But that is the case only for the monotheistic religions, for Buddhists (and the believers of other Indian religions), for example. face no theodicy problem. Their *karma/samsara* beliefs forestall it. And in the Abrahamitc religions, it is, it seems to me, an existential problem for only a tiny minority of their believers. It seems certainly to be no major concern, or focus, for the greater number of their 'folk' or 'lay' believers. The applicability and heuristic and analytical usefulness of Byrne's proposed definition seems, therefore, restricted to a specific kind of religions, a restricted group of believers, and a specific mode of religion.

[151] Cf. also Saler 1993: 209.

ed its earlier pervasive influence, to varying degrees in the different Western nations, to a few remaining privileges in distinct spheres. For the remainder, it was constitutionally, and increasingly also actually, banned from the other domains of society, and reduced, in various degrees, to being the private affair of its believers.[152]

This progressive dissolution of religion from the public realm of Western societies in the past three centuries may be regarded as the major cause of, and condition for, the constitution of the typical 'semantic field' (the set of denotations and connotations) of the modern Western prototypical, 'household', concept of 'religion'.[153] Other important factors were the rapid increase of Western commerce (in its several meanings) with the rest of humankind since the voyages of discovery of the 15th century and the development of Western world wide trade. Furthermore, the establishment of white settler colonies in several parts of the world, and of territorial colonialism over most of the rest of the world in the 19th century. They caused us to coin the prototypical concept of 'religions' on the basis of the many rough and ready analogies to modern Western 'religion' which white Westerners 'discovered' in the public life of non-Western societies. And in addition also that of 'religion' as a meta-concept.[154]

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The synthetic religions of the second axial age

My third group of religions is the very large group of the 'newest', again mostly tiny, because very recent, religions. They are the products of what I term the 'second axial age'. Its socio-economic basis was laid in the 'globalisation' taking off for Western societies in the voyages of discovery in the 15th century, to culminate in 19th and 20th century European colonialism, and in the present post-colonial economic supremacy of the West (and Japan). That huge expansion of Western power has been made possible by a complex set of interacting factors. One is the 'Enlightenment' of (part of) the Western elite and the fundamental changes in the political order of Western societies to which it contributed. Another is the revolutionary development of science and technology, and the rapid industrialisation of the Western societies. One should add to these their fast demographic growth with its attendant 'export' of white settlers to virtually all parts of the globe with a moderate climate, and the increase in complexity and differentiation of the institutions of Western societies (e.g. in their bureaucratisation). Even more important are mass literacy, the huge increase of standards of living (uneven at first, and then fairly well distributed), and the general social upwards mobility in these societies. Finally, the constant increase of levels and length of schooling, and the huge increase in mo-

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[152] I am aware that I omit certain prominent features of recent developments, such as fairly big minorities among the believers of the major religions who are vehement in their opposition to these developments. They attempt to impose their 'theocratic' orthodoxy upon their societies by political, and even violent, means (for an examination of one such an example, cf. Platvoet 1995b), or 'withdraw' into ecstatic versions of their religion.

[153].As does Saler (1993: 209): 'The historical crystalization of religion in the West constitutes a long-term, complex process of bounding and clarification in tandem with shrinkage and weakening'.

[154] Cf. Saler (1993: 200): 'Ideas about the natures and histories of religions in the West serve as […] prototypes guiding anthropologists in their development of models of religion among non-Western peoples'. Cf. also Platvoet 1993: 236, 241; 1998c: 115-118.

bility and information, both in terms of technology, supplying the means, and of the substance: the actual amount of travel, and the density, and intensity, of the various kinds of printed and electronic information distributed.

The specifically religious products of the second axial age began to appear in the early 19th century.[155] It has, however, also produced other effects, two of which I should briefly mention: irreligion and major shifts in Western Christianity. I have already hinted above at 'secularisation': the constant attrition of the role of religion in the [**496**] public life of modern Western societies, and more recently in many modernising societies elsewhere under the influence of powerful model role of the West. One of its outcomes is the massive decline of the relevance of religion to the private lives of many of the well-to-do, as they are found nowadays in virtually all walks of life in Western societies, and in some non-Western ones as well.[156] Another is constituted by the major changes that took place in Christianity. Western colonialism enabled the Western Christian churches to initiate Christianity's first-ever global missionary movement. It was numerically very successful, for the preliterate societies of the world converted en masse when Western Christian missions teamed up with Western colonial administrations to spread the three Western commodities of 'commerce, civilisation, and Christianity' among them by means of schools and hospitals. At the same time, inclusive theologies and biblical criticism became the hallmarks of the politically and institutionally powerful new liberal academic theology in the established churches in the affluent West. They also provoked two different responses: radicalised neo-orthodoxy and the ecstatic enthusiasm of the Pentecostal, Charismatic, Full and Prosperity Gospel varieties of modern Christianity in the West and elsewhere.[157]

The most typical product of the second axial age are, however, the numerous newest post-Christian religions, emerging in, or imported into, the modern, industrialising, secularising, increasingly well-to-do and well-informed societies of the West since the early 19th century, and more recently also into other globalising parts of the modern world. Though highly articulate, they are, curiously, most often not at all sharply bounded, because in terms of doctrine they are synthetic religions in stead of exclusive. Like the preliterate religions before them, they are open, adoptive and adaptable, and

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[155] Several options are at hand for marking retrospectively the beginning of the religious part of the second axial age. 1789, the French revolution, and 1787-1791, the American Constitution and the First Amendment, are obvious choices, of course, as early markers of the secularisation of Western societies, the privatisation of Western religion(s), and the right to freedom of religion. Another obvious choice is 1799, when Schleiermacher published his *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, because it may be taken as the first major statement of Protestant liberal theology of the inclusive kind. My own favourite starting point is 1823-1827, when Joseph Smith received 'revelations' that made him add new books to the Bible and found the (Mormon) Church of Jesus Christ of the Saints of the Latter Day.

[156] E.g. it is reported in the television feature film on modern Japan, *The dilemma of Mr. Yamaguchi*, that only 4% of the Japanese took an active interest in religion in the early 1990s. Cf. also Shorter & Onyancha (1997: 36, *passim*) on church attendance in Nairobi, where 80 % of the population claims to be Christian, but only 4% is actively involved in church life, 12% goes to church once a week, 20% attends 'less frequently'. The rest, more than half of Nairobi's 1,5 million, is 'unchurched'. Cf. also Platvoet 1998d.

particularly receptive to new revelations. They are mostly missionary religions that aspire ultimately to teach all humans the means towards salvation. Despite this 'world religion' aim, and claim, they are very [**497**] different from the so-called 'world religions', for the salvation they seek is most often not a trans-temporal one. The seek 'paradise on earth' in the form of a world without war, poverty, injustice, disease, gender inequality, and ecological destruction. In brief, they strive after one that is free from all the 'evils' of the modern world. In addition, they normally present themselves as 'para-religions': they claim no exclusive allegiance, or the confession of an exclusively true faith from their ever more private, prosperous, highly schooled, cosmopolitan jet-set believers. These shop in the modern religious supermarkets of the bookstore specialising in esoteric and exotic religions, and on internet, and hardly ever in a church. The newest religions graciously offer potential adherents a faith that they may add to the one, or the ones, which they already profess or practise.[158] Although they are abreast with the best of modern PR and advertising techniques for promoting their message,[159] they have so far reached only a smattering of scattered upper class intellectuals. Despite their efficient use of publicity, PR and corporate finance in a receptive market, their institutional place and power in these rich societies is, therefore, as small as is the number of their adherents. It is no greater than that of any other recently established voluntary association, and much smaller than that of the collective of the mainline Christian denominations, which, although numerically much reduced, are often only formally, and to some degree, de-established. The institutional [**498**] position of the newest 'synthetic' – often esoteric or exotic – religions is, consequently, even more humble in modern societies than that of the earlier demoted doctrinal religions.

I should add only that the technological, economic, demographic, social, institutional and communicative transformations of modern societies seem to proceed on an ever increasing scale, with ever greater rapidity and world wide, with both blissful and baneful effects. The second axial age seems not to have spent its force by far yet. It seems very likely that it will wreak both havoc and massive change in all the religions of the

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[157] Cf. also Platvoet 1998d on secularisation in Africa and developments in 'European Christianity abroad' at present.

[158] Cf. Platvoet 1993: 242-243.

[159] Cf. Knott (1998: 95) on the 'export of Hindu spirituality' by *gurus* travelling to, or settling in, Western societies. An example of 'post-Hindu' spirituality is TM ('transcendental meditation'), also known as the 'Science of Creative Intelligence'. It is spread by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who has recently settled in TM's new headquarter in Vlodrop, The Netherlands, in a former Franciscan friary. The path to mind expansion TM promotes is presented as supported by modern neurobiology's techniques of brain wave measurement and as, therefore, not 'a religion' but a 'science' that provides testable results. It would also turn the adepts of TM into *siddhas*, 'accomplished' persons. Mind expansion would enable them to overcome the limitations of their bodies and perform the feat of 'hopping' (very moderate levitation). It would also enable them to produce healing effects on their environment. By meditation *siddhas* would bring down crime, accident, rape and other misfortune rates, etc. in their localities. For the latter purpose, TM has established a *siddha* neighbourhood of 300 houses with its own a meditation hall and a primary school in Lelystad, The Netherlands, in 1991. Its *Natuurwetpartij* took part in Dutch national and local elections in recent years. It presently has a representative on the town council of Lelystad. On TM in the Netherlands in the past two decades, cf. Van der Burg 1981; Schouten 1982: 69-71; 1991: 85-86; Van der Burg, Handgraaf & Kranenborg 1994; Kranenborg 1986: 74-75; Anonymous 1997, 1998.

past, and produce many more religions of 'its own kind' for a considerable time to come.[160]

The diversity of the human religions

This is, of course, a much too brief characteristic of the diversity and range of the three kinds of religions of humankind. To show that the 'religions' of humankind constitute a highly polysemic, because polythetic, collection of phenomena, I would need to go also into the huge internal variety of each of these three kinds by describing at least some of the single religions in each of the three groups. I would also have to discuss the transitions between these three types. Space does not allow such more detailed demonstrations, however, and I can only briefly indicate that the term 'the religions' refers to a collection of phenomena which is diffuse, both *ad intra*, in respect of what it includes, and *ad extra*, in respect of what it does not include.

Ad intra, because what we intuitively, but unhesitatingly, place within the *Sammelbegriff*, 'container' or generic category, of 'the religions of humankind', and therefore under the *Oberbegriff*,[161] 'umbrella' or meta-concept or abstract notion, of 'religion', proves to be much more diverse in content, form and function upon detailed historical, sociological, and other examination, than the initial modern Western prototypical concepts of 'religion' and 'the religions' would seem to cover and anticipate. Let me give some random examples.

[**499**] Theravada Buddhism, at least that of the learned monks schooled in the *abhidhamma* scholastics,[162] is an a-theist soteriology,[163] which moreover considers the belief

[160] Cf. Platvoet 1993: 236-237; 1998c: 118-119.

[161] On 'religion' as *Oberbegriff* and 'religions' as *Sammelbegriff*, cf. Feil 1986: 29-30.

[162] The third part of the Pali canonical scriptures. This 'Advanced Doctrine' is a metaphysical psychology and 'therapy' of the mind for the advanced. It teaches that meditative introspection will finally lead to the liberating insight and awareness that *atman*, the 'self', and all that it perceives, are phenomena of, and in, the human consciousness (*chitta*), and as such, in final analysis, impermanent and insubstantial. *Atman*, and all the 'reality' it is conscious of, is to be understood as a 'fleeting functional concurrence of [interdependent] forces' (*dharmas*), which are 'real' only during the brief moments of their 'co-arising' (*pratitya-samutpada*). For further details, cf. Corless 1989: 21-22, 122-127.

[163] It is not 'atheistic' in the usual Western meaning of denying the existence of gods, but non-theistic. It relegates the gods to a very marginal position, for Theravada monastic Buddhism holds that the gods are as much subject to *karma* and *samsara*, and in need of deliverance from it, as are men. In addition, the soteriological prospects of the gods are regarded as much poorer than those of men. For, although both gods and men are said to have been made aware of their predicament by the teachings of the Buddha(s), only men can actually enter the *sangha* (community of monks). Only men, therefore, can practise the path to *Nirvana*, 'extinction' [of the passions that are held to cause one to continue to suffer *samsara* and continual death]. The Buddha taught that path after having achieved, according to himself and his fellow believers, his own 'extinction' by his 'analysis' of the '*anatta* condition' of men. That 'enlightenment' was regarded as a condition of freedom from *samsara*, a state which was beyond affirmation and negation. From the Buddhist perspective, the Supreme God (Brahma) is the most deluded of all the gods. For he 'does not know [that he is also under the control of *karma*, JP], but thinks that, since there is no being more powerful than he [is], he created his own power and therefore all things. Buddhism views God as the ultimate megalomaniac' (Corless 1989: 122). Buddhists state that the Buddha did not worship the gods, but that intelligent gods worshipped him. It should be added, however, that all other major forms of Buddhism are thoroughly theist: the popular Buddhism of the Theravada nations in South East Asia is

in *atman*, the 'soul', the most pernicious illusion (*maya*) and the root cause of suffering. Unlike doctrinal Christianity, it has no problem with explaining suffering.[164] Preliterate and other community religions developed no reflective codes of morality. They know of no sacred-profane, matter-spirit, natural-supernatural, or 'church-world' dichotomies. Nor do they face a problem in explaining suffering: witches caused it, or sorcerers, or ancestors because they felt slighted, or gods or God because they take pleasure in sending misfortune.[165] They do not characteristically cultivate the feelings that Westerners consider 'typically religious', those of awe, reverence, sense of mystery, feelings of guilt, and adoration. [**500**] They are not soteriologies pursuing trans-temporal spiritual 'salvation', and neither are they organised into a distinctive social institution. The newest religions show numerous features that divert significantly from the pool of traits that characterise prototypical Western religion. They are synthetic in character and eager for a new, or even constant flow of, revelation. They present themselves as para-religions and as 'science'. They overlap with psychology, psycho-hygienic techniques, neurobiology, the natural sciences, astro-physics, science fiction and space exploration, but also with business and management. They have capitalist business empires, publication enterprises, schools and universities. They are private religions. Their cosmologies, conceptions of the 'meta-empirical' and of 'the soul' are substantively different from those of the modern Christian West. 'Religious' ritual is shrivelling in them and prayer is disappearing from them of; etc.

In brief, all these 'religions' display numerous traits that are 'counter-intuitive'[166] to the model with the greatest prototypicality, i.e. modern Western-Christian 'biblical' mainstream religion; and some of them explicitly deny that they are 'religions'. Even so, ordinary language users in Western societies face no problem in smoothly subsuming them under the 'natural language category' of 'religion(s)' in daily life.

The categories of 'religion' and 'religions' also constitute a diffuse collection of cultural phenomena *ad extra*, because we cannot establish with any certainty the border that marks off unambiguously what should be placed inside, and what should remain outside them. Yet, we have a hunch why other religions fit our modern Western lexical model of 'religion' well enough for us to group them intuitively and pragmatically under our modern Western prototypical categories of 'religion' and 'religions'.[167]

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theist (cf. e.g. Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988, esp. 65-200; Kapferer 1991), as is the flamboyant quasi-theism of all popular and lay Mahayana and especially Vajrayana Buddhism, as are most of the monastic varieties of the latter two (cf. e.g., Williams 1989: 215ff.).

[164] *Pace* Byrne, in this volume.

[165] Again *pace* Byrne, in this volume. Cf. also Platvoet 1999a.

[166] Cf. Spiro (1966: 91): 'For me […] any definition of "religion" which does not include, as a key variable, the belief in superhuman […] beings who have power to help or harm man is counter-intuitive'. Spiro requires of (analytical) definitions of 'religion' that they are both cross-culturally applicable and intra-culturally intuitive, or at least not intra-culturally counter-intuitive. The culture Spiro has in mind here is the modern Western one in which the modern Western prototypical concept of 'religion' arose. He requires that a definition of religion is culturally intuitive to us, modern Westerners. He does not require that it is intelligible to the believers to whose religions a definition is being applied.

[167] Cf. Saler 1993: 214-215

[**501**]

Technical versus natural class?

At this point I need to qualify the statement of Jan Snoek that I assume that '"the religions" are a natural class' and refer to an observable reality that is 'waiting to be discovered by us'.[168] The implication is that their definition is not 'constructed for our own, scholarly or other, purposes', but needs to conform to the realities which we observe.

Let me first admit that I do accept that the prototypical terms of 'religion' and 'religions' have a referential function in modern Western societies. They serve as our labels for referring, first of all, to specific cultural complexes in modern Western societies. In addition, they serve also as the prototypical models by which we use the labels of 'religion' and 'religions' for all those cultural phenomena in other human societies throughout humankind's known history – and also in the most recent phase of Western societies –[169] that we regard as similar enough for us to pragmatically subsume them under those categories. And we do so despite the huge variation, and the complexity of their single instances. We use these symbols for several purposes, one of them being that we indicate by them the field of research of the 'Science(s) of Religion(s)'. In this sense, I may be said to '[assume] that "the religions" are a natural class'.

However, it may be clear also from the arguments presented so far that my position is not adequately represented in the terms of Snoek's dichotomy of technical class *versus* natural class concepts or definitions, the former stipulated by us for specific purposes, the latter imposing themselves on us. The matter is more complex. The aim of my historical analysis above was to demonstrate that the complex but accidental course of Western history, internal and external, made us conceive the term 'religions' in the typically Western senses in which we happen to use them now, in prototypical as well as more clarified ways. We apply these terms also to certain cultural complexes in other societies. That is an *etic* procedure.[170] We establish that other societies and cultures also have 'a religion' or several 'religions', by the use of Western meanings, models and procedures. [**502**] Most of these societies, however, have no term and concept of 'religion(s)'; a few others have developed their own, but quite different symbols for quite different aspects of the cultural phenomena that we term their 'religions'.

On the basis of this analysis, I suggest that we regard the modern Western concept of 'religions' as belonging simultaneously, in a dialectical way, to both the 'natural' and the 'technical' class. It belongs to the 'natural' class in as far as it refers to a domain in Western societies that has become discoverable as 'religion' and 'religions' recently by the processes of institutionalisation and separation from other domains that took place

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[168] Snoek, in this volume, his note 12

[169] Cf. Snoek, in this volume, and above my discussion of the religions of the second axial age.

[170] *Etic* refers to any 'non-*emic*' meaning, i.e. to meanings that are significant, not to the actors in a society and culture, but to observers. For the *emic-etic* distinction, cf. Pike 1954: 8-11; Fetterman 1989: 32. The classic, but for my purpose too narrow definition of *etic* is by Harris (1968: 575): 'Etic statements depend upon the phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers.' The crucial word is 'observers'. I label all distinctions made by outsiders as *etic*.

in them. In ordinary speech, however, the terms 'religion' and 'religions' refer, albeit in diffuse ways, to many other aspects of those Western cultural phenomena than those of their institutionalisation and separation from other domains. As prototypical terms, they comprise a wide set of denotative and connotative meanings of the multi-stranded kind.[171] 'Religion' and 'the religions' may be regarded to belong to 'technical' class in as far we employ these Western natural class concepts for constituting specific cultural phenomena in other societies as their 'religion' and 'religions'. We do so as observers by the *etic* procedure of discovering meanings in them that are significant to us. We may employ such 'technically' constituted labels to refer to specific other 'religions' prototypically, in the manner of pre-reflective usage of terms in daily life; or to detect them heuristically, to analyse them theoretically, to battle them strategically, to reflect on them philosophically or theologically, etc.

'Religions', as the symbol of a concept in the minds of modern Westerners, is, therefore, used by them, as both a natural class concept to refer to religions in Western societies, and as a technical class concept to refer to 'religions' in especially, but not exclusively, non-Western societies. Both have, therefore, a referential function. And both may be employed in several ways, for many purposes, and at different levels of articulation. Westerners use them prototypically, in daily, pre-reflective usage; strategically in order to include some [**503**] and exclude others, e.g. by labelling them 'superstition', 'magic', 'paganism', etc.; and scholarly, in order to study these complex and varied cultural phenomena as objectively as we possibly can. One of the aims of the scholarly study of religions is an accurate study of the full range of the cultural phenomena that we have come to designate prototypically as 'religions' in all societies past and present and thereby reform our 'natural class' concept of 'religions'. I insist on the referential function of this concept, because I advocate a programme of reform of that concept. Its adequacy must constantly be questioned and reviewed precisely because we employ a natural class concept as a 'technical class' concept. Thereby we impose our meanings on their culture. In brief, I plead for a process of critical reflection on, and revision of, Western notions as instruments of research into non-Western religions.

This provides another argument for my thesis that definitions of 'religion' should not be constructed as statements about the essence or nature of 'religion', for they imply a claim to universal validity and unique truth and are, therefore, hegemonic.[172] Instead, definitions of 'religions' should be regarded as no more than a legitimately wide and manifold set of ambiguous and, therefore, constantly revisable, conceptual instruments for utilitarian research purposes. One such a purpose is the heuristic one of initially locating where that complex phenomenon of 'religion', or a particular kind of 'religions', may be found. Others are those of ever more accurately describing, analysing and explaining particular 'religions' as dense phenomena (conceptually and substantively)

[171] Cf. the section *The non-doctrinal community religions* above, especially notes 135-139.
[172] I follow Robinson (1968: 5) in not regarding definitions as propositions with a truth value, but as proposals with an instrumental utility, i.e. as made for a specific purpose which is to be achieved by a certain method.

bound, in time and place, to the cultural history of humankind.[173] Definitions of 'religion', I suggest, serve academic work best when they are regarded as the crude, culturally conditioned, and always to some degree biased instruments by which we seek to investigate, to the best of our abilities, the complex historical phenomena which we happen to prototypically regard [**504**] as 'religions'. As the prototypical concept of 'religion(s)' subsumes pre-reflectively many religions that differ greatly from the prototype, thereby causing vagueness about its boundaries,[174] Saler suggests that we be aware that

> the most interesting that we may be able to predicate about 'religions' […] might only be predicable of some rather than all. [… We should] expect not a set of universal predicates for religions but, instead, a network of predicates criss-crossing and overlapping in their applicability to phenomena that we variously deem better and less-good exemplifications of the category religion.[175]

It is by means of these inherently weak conceptual means that we must attempt to obtain knowledge about 'the religions' that is as unbiased and objective as we can possibly achieve.

Against paradigmatic integration

> The postmodern mind, more tolerant (since it is better aware of its own weaknesses) than its modern predecessor […], is soberly aware of the tendency of definitions to conceal as much as they reveal and to maim and obfuscate while pretending to clarify and straighten up. It also accepts the fact that, all too often, […] the ineffable is […] an integral part of the human mode of being in the world.[176]

In the past two centuries, 'religion' and 'the religions' have become common household concepts in modern Western societies. They indicate a specific set of cultural phenomena in Western societies, and cover similar ones in non-Western societies, the broad meaning of which were understood to be quite evident for speakers of Western languages. This was mainly so because of the distinctive position and prominent role which 'religion' played – and was increasingly perceived to have played – in Western societies. It was generally assumed by analogy that other 'religions' held positions and performed roles in other societies similar to those of (the Christian mainline) religion in Western societies in the recent past.

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[173] The reason for rejecting essentialist definitions of 'religion' is, therefore, the complexity of the cultural phenomena indicated by that label. Essentialist definitions are possible, however, of 'simplex' cultural phenomena, like the precisely defined cultural conventions used all over the (modern) world in the formal and natural sciences. Saler (1993: 202) gives as an example: 'odd numbers are integers indivisible by two'.
[174] Saler 1993: 120-121, 204.
[175] Saler 1993: 201.
[176] Bauman 1997: 165.

As a result, 'religion' and 'the religions' have become important objects of Western academic research in the past two centuries. They constitute both the core concepts, and – as the 'empirical cultural [**505**] realities'[177] to which these labels refer – the central objects of study of the 'Science(s) of Religion(s)' in the universities of Continental Europe and the (academic) 'Study of Religions' in most Anglo-Saxon universities.[178] As religion and the religions constitute the formal and material object of study of these disciplines, they provide them with both their *raison d'être* and field of study, and with their academic, social and financial justification. Much effort has been spent, therefore, in the past two centuries on defining the core concepts of 'religion' and 'the religions' as a means of delimiting the province of these disciplines, locating their object of study, developing insight into it and the theory behind it, and in order to gain academic legitimacy and status for this field of study.

That has resulted in an ever-growing number of definitions of 'religion' which runs by now to over a hundred, and new definitions are constantly being added to it.[179] Many of these were inspired by a long Western scholastic tradition, inherited from Aristotelian philosophy, that definitions of 'religion' serve to establish the boundary (*finis*) between 'religion' and 'non-religion', and thereby 'define' what religion's nature, or essence, is in whatever time and place. By means of such definitions, views of 'religion' that were intimately tied to particular times, places, cultures, societies, groups, or even persons, were often presented as formulating the enduring and 'transcendent' nature of [**506**] 'religion as such'. They implied mostly the hegemonic intention, that others should also view religion in that very same way and in no other manner, or even that believers should practise it in the particular manner this definition prescribed.

The ever-growing diversity of definitions of 'religion' has made it clear that the prospect of achieving a consensus among scholars of religions in the near future on how to define 'religion' has become increasingly dim. Some scholars of religions, therefore, despair of 'religion' ever being 'properly', or 'truly', defined in a manner that is convin-

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[177] Only part of which is directly observable. Like all other institutions of human societies, religions consist primarily in (mostly inarticulate) notions in the minds of men about relationships between them and 'others' with whom they constitute an (empirical or postulated) community. In the case of religions, these 'others' are the postulated beings and powers in the postulated meta-empirical realms, and/or the humans (oneself included), animals, plants, organic matter, or artefacts to which meta-empirical elements, qualities or powers are attributed. Believers conceive of themselves as involved in a social, causal and cognitive community with them. Their belief notions about that community, about the reciprocal relations obtaining between themselves and these several categories of beings or powers in it, and about the ways these affect them, or may affect them, govern the attitudes, feelings, emotions and behaviour, deemed proper, towards these invisible beings and/or the visible beings or things believed to be endowed with invisible qualities or powers. Their religions, as mental constructions, are, therefore, like other institutions, observable only in the behaviour (collective and public, or private) which these notions govern, in the symbols employed in that behaviour in speech, body language, dress and decoration, in the social organisation and ordering of the participants observed, in the architecture and decoration of the places specifically designed for such collective or private behaviour, in the calendar, etc. See further Platvoet 1990: 187-188; 1994: 704.

[178] 'The History of Religions' has also been used to designate that loose conglomerate of academic disciplines in both traditions.

[179] On this, cf. Platvoet 1990, 1994.

cingly 'valid' for all religions and for all scholars of religions of whatever discipline, school and paradigm in the academic study of religions.[180] The academic Study of Religion(s), therefore, seems unable to develop a unified, and unifying, set of core concepts, theories and testable hypotheses about its subject matter, the religions, by which it may constitute itself into a theoretically integrated and programmatically well-defined group of academic disciplines that can legitimately claim its place in the university.[181] It seems they are condemned to remain forever in a 'pre-paradigmatic', theoretically non-unified state as a group of disciplines.[182]

Behind this quest for a universally valid definition of religion as a means for the paradigmatic integration of the disciplines studying religion(s) lie assumptions and strategies that need to be critically examined. The assumptions are two. The essentialist one, that a universally valid definition of 'religion' is possible; and the 'paradigmatic' one, that such a definition is necessary, or at least desirable, for achieving the integration of the 'sciences of religion(s)' into a paradigmatically unified cluster of academic disciplines with a 'sound' scientific programme and reputation. The strategies pursued are also two. One is the competitive one *ad extra* of establishing the sciences of religion(s) as an integrated group of disciplines in the universities, [**507**] which is respectable. The other is the potentially hegemonic one *ad intra*, of deducing from a specific definition of religion, proclaimed as universally valid, a set of concepts, theories, hypotheses and a unified research programme for all the sciences of religion(s).

I have adduced three arguments against the feasibility of the quest for a universally valid definition of religion at both the conceptual, or stipulative, and the historical, or 'substantive', level in this contribution. The first is the contingency of the meaning of the modern Western terms of 'religion' and 'religions', as I showed above by detailing their complex semantic history. The second is the absence of equivalent terms in other societies and cultures. The third is the constant increase in complexity of the study of religions, terminologically, conceptually, theoretically, and especially substantively, in terms of the data discovered, since the academic research into the religions began in the 19th century by the multidisciplinary study of 'religion' in Western societies, and of the 'religions' of other societies by Western means.

The most important of these arguments is the growing awareness of the substantive complexity of the religions of humankind. It is due primarily to a century and a half of descriptive work on the 'scriptural' religions with the aid of primarily philological research methods, and nearly a century of academic ethnography of preliterate religions

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[180] E.g. Webb 1911[1], 1915: introduction; 1916: 59-60; cf. also Robinson 1968: 4; Wiebe 1981: 9-10

[181] Cf. *e.g.*, Martin (1985: 1) on 'the [symptomatic] failure of religious studies to congeal as a "discipline", despite the appearance of an increasing number of departments of religion or religious studies'. Martin (1985: 2) regards Religious Studies as one of the several 'multi-disciplinary newcomers to the humanities in the 1960s'. It is loosely unified by having a field of study in common. But it is not a discipline, if 'discipline' is taken to mean 'operating with a common set of theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures'.

[182] For an example of the (presumed) development of a discipline from a pre-paradigmatic into a paradigmatic state, cf. Belier (1995: 17-50) on French sociology of religion from Comte to the *L'Année Sociologique* group around Durkheim between 1885 and 1914.

through especially the social scientific method of participant observation. They have uncovered a polymorphism and dissimilarity in content and structure in the actual religions of humankind, past and present, far greater than can be accommodated by the model of our term of 'religion', the Western Christian mainline religion of the recent past. The 'proper'[183] content, structure and shape with which 'religion' and 'the religions' have been endowed since their emergence as prototypical folk terms in the languages of Western Europe in eighteenth century, increasingly prove too constraining in the study of religions in several respects. An obvious, and famous, case in point is the theism central to Western Christian religion in the analysis of 'non-theist' religions, as I have emphasised above. But a much greater problem is the classificatory scheme of 'monotheism', 'polytheism' and 'pantheism', derived from Judaeo-Christian-Muslim theism, which have [**508**] served since long as labels for distinct 'kinds' of religions. Hinduism and, for example, Akan traditional religion(s), however, are simultaneously monotheist, polytheist and pantheist, and in different ways.

Another major obstacle is the triad of conceptual dichotomies, basic to modern Western Christian mainline religion, of the 'natural' *versus* the 'supernatural', the material *versus* the spiritual, and the 'profane' versus the 'holy'.[184] Though more study is needed, this fundamental opposition between the meta-empirical and empirical realms seems an adaptation to, and an attempt on the part of modern Christianity to survive as a religion in, modern Western societies at the time when Western cosmology was radically being changed by modern physics. This opposition is alien to many, if not most other religions, not for any religious reason but mainly, in my view, because they were the products of very different cultural histories. In brief, there is an ever increasing substantive strain, and gap, between the modern Western prototypical concepts of 'religion' and 'the religions', and the needs of the descriptive study of the actual religions as cultural phenomena, not only in other societies but nowadays in Western societies as well.

The quest for a universally valid definition of 'religion', however, is not only not feasible, it is also not desirable, for it would add, to the substantive strain, described above, an 'analytical' one. That strain stems from the 'explanatory' studies of religion. By modifying the modern Western concept of 'religion' substantively, the descriptive disciplines stayed close to the core meaning that is ordinarily ascribed to 'religion(s)' in the Western languages, and shared by the believers of virtually all religions. 'Religion' is then considered to involve its believers in some (postulated) community and communication with unseen (i.e. meta-testable) beings, powers, or qualities. These are believed to reside in an unseen realm, or a number of such realms, and/or in the perceptible world. They are also believed to produce, or to be able to produce, effects, harmful and-/or beneficent, in the empirical world of the believers. Religion, then, involves believers

[183] In its double meaning of the properties with which religion(s) is/are 'naturally' endowed, and of the qualities which 'rightly', or 'correctly', (are deemed to) belong to them and thus to de-fine, or de-limit, which instances should and should not, be included in it or them.

[184] Cf. Bock (1969: 380): '[T]he Western contrast between "natural" and "supernatural" is simply not relevant to the understanding of many societies' (quoted in Saler 1993: 28).

in a community of postulated reciprocal relations with meta-testable beings, powers or qualities, of postulated meta-empirical causality, and of postulated dialogue.

[**509**] The explanatory disciplines, however, – with the exception of Anthropology of Religion(s) – were hardly interested in the description of (other) religion(s). They were especially, if not exclusively,[185] bent on studying one or other of their several extra-religious functions, for individuals and/or societies, in order to propose a theory by which 'religion', i.e. modern Western Christian religion, was reduced to that function by which it was 'explained'. Analytical foci on one or other of the non-religious (e.g. psychological, therapeutic, social, political, economical, ecological, cosmological, etc.) function of 'religion' are, of course, perfectly legitimate. They have also contributed many important insights into the ways, often subtly hidden, in which religions function in the non-religious domains of their societies. In the history of the research on religion(s), however, explanatory theories of religion have often proved to be ideologically inspired and to served strategic aims of an extra-academic kind. Being guided by selective *idées dominatrices*, they produced not only partial, but often also biased perceptions and analyses of (in particular modern Western Christian mainline) religion. In the academic study of religions, these have proved limiting, confusing, and misleading in the definition of religion. They were limiting by their reduction of religion, and the religions, to one non-religious function only and by ignoring the many other non-religious functions of 'religion' and the religions, and especially its/their religious function.

They were confusing by developing stipulations of 'religion', which defined 'religion' as anything in human cultures and societies that served the 'explanatory' function selected. By these 'definitions', euphemistically termed 'inclusive, they developed concepts of 'religion' that were not only fuzzy, but often included more non-religion than religion, and at times no religion (in the traditional, prototypical, or substantive meaning) at all. The contribution of Ter Borg to this volume is a case in point. If people say that soccer is their religion, he does not take that as a metaphorical figure of speech, but as their attributing a superhuman quality to soccer, or to soccer stars. He argues that soccer then enables them to cope with their fear of the frailty and finiteness of life and functions thereby as their religion.[186] He also holds that man is *homo religiosus*, not in the meaning of the [**510**] substantive, but of his functional concept of religion. By such analytical moves, numerous concepts of 'religion' have been developed. They range from being remote from what rank and file Westerners grasp, by prototypical intuition, as the meaning of 'religion' and 'the religions', to being foreign and alien, or even insulting, to them, especially when are they are themselves believers of those religions.

Explanatory theories, lastly, mislead by reducing religion to one of its non-religious functions only. By focusing on one function, they have a blinding effect – a property of much theory when guided by an *idée dominatrice*. A century of descriptive and explanatory analysis of 'religions' has conclusively shown that religions not only have religi-

[185] Cf. Ter Borg, in this volume: 'functional definitions [of 'religion'] are exclusive. Everything except a certain function is excluded'.
[186] He cautions that he does not propose that soccer itself is religion.

ous and non-religious functions, but also have many of each. None of the many theories of 'religion' that explain religion on the basis of one function only, have so far been accepted by the scholarly community as an adequate explanation of religion. Nor is any one of them likely ever to do so in view of the multi-functionalism of the religions that is increasingly becoming manifest by precisely the many different attempts at mono-functional explanation, and by other scientific research. Taken together, the mono-functional attempts at explaining religion have provided us with a wealth of important, but partial explanations of what religions do for men and their societies.

The polymorphism and multi-functionalism of the human religions has landed the academic study of religions in a terminological, conceptual and theoretical pluralism and fragmentation – not unlike its object of study in Western societies at present. That causes concern among scholars who strive after the paradigmatic integration of the academic study of religions by means of a unified set of concepts and theories. The polymorphism and multi-functionalism of its object of study, the religions, seem to me to prevent a paradigmatic integration of the sciences of religions. The useful and academically legitimate diversity of the subject of the study of religions, the descriptive and explanatory sciences, seems to me to forbid it.

In conclusion

On the basis of the historical data and analyses presented in this article, I suggest that scholars of religions shift from the hegemonic search for the one essential definition of 'religion' to the humble business of developing many modest 'operational' ones that are [**511**] explicitly instrumental, pragmatic, revisable and non-hegemonic. Their object of study, the religions, is complex and vast, and of interest to a wide variety of academic disciplines. It is, therefore, evidently legitimate to develop many different operational definitions of 'religion' for pursuing the wide range of research interests scholars may indulge in, in the context of their different disciplines. A pragmatics of defining 'religion' should, therefore, be developed. It should analyse what kinds of definitions, or concepts, of 'religion' have been, or might be, constructed in what contexts, for what purposes and with what results. It should review them to evaluate whether they are legitimate in view of the data to be studied; and whether they are adequate, or effective, in view of the purposes to be pursued and the analyses to be made.[187] Definitions of 'religion' should no longer be regarded as constituting truth about what 'religion as such' is, wherever and whenever it is found.[188] But they should be developed, and examined, as

[187] Waardenburg (1986: 17; 1990: 20) also insists that defining 'religion' should serve the pragmatics of the study of religions: 'The essential question for [a] science [of religions] is: Which phenomena and data, and which conceivable links between them, do, or do not, emerge into the field of study for scholars [of religions], when a specific definition of religion is being used?'

[188] Cf. the passionate argument of Hans Kippenberg (1983: 10-13) against a Science of Religions that is based on the presumption of a universally valid definition of 'religion' and his plea for an explicit analy-

tools for discovering, investigating, interpreting and explaining some aspect of 'religion', or of (a) particular 'religion(s)'.

The substantive diversity of the human religions, their many different functions in quite specific contexts, and their many different combinations of religious and non-religious functions, present us, therefore, with an academic justification of a pragmatic and pluralising, rather than a systematic and unifying, approach to the definition of 'religion'. A pragmatics of the definition of 'religion' should start, I suggest, from the 'contexts' – the research fields and objects of study of the disciplines, their research projects and their particular research aims – rather than from their culturally conditioned concepts of 'religion', and the contests over them. The task of a pragmatics of defining 'religion' is to analyse and assess the heuristic, analytical and theoretical utility of the concepts of religion developed for particular, context-bound tasks. It is to contest them if they happen to be inadequate for the task for which they have been developed in [**512**] that specific context. Or to dispute them if they, or the results achieved by means of them, are extrapolated as valid, or true, or effective, for the quite different historical and/or disciplinary contexts, for which they have not been designed or tested.[189] I conceive of these contexts primarily as a delimited research problem and a particular research strategy in a specific research field, against the background of the constantly shifting research constellations of a particular discipline. Scholars of religions are as context-bound as are the religions they study. Having been trained in a particular discipline in the study of religions, they face the task of studying a particular religion – or aspect, or function, of a religion, or of several religions – and the recurrent task of developing adequate conceptual instruments and methodology by which they may execute that task. The outcomes of their research are also context-bound.

Academic research contexts are, however, not the only contexts in which definitions of religion function pragmatically and strategically. Academic definitions of 'religion' and 'the religions' are merely a special domain within the wide field of the extra-academic pragmatics of defining these terms in modern Western societies (and increasingly in modern globalising societies outside the West). That pragmatics is of two kinds. One is their use, prototypical and other, in the Western languages in the past three centuries with which I was concerned in this article. The other is their implicit use or their explicit definition in the political economy of not only the modern Western nations, but virtually throughout the modern world now, for a wide range of strategic purposes, from legal,[190] financial and economical to theological, missionary, political, and 'ethnic'. The study of the extra-academic pragmatics of defining 'religion' is a very important, but greatly neglected field of study of study. It will also teach us much about the academic pragmatics of defining 'religion', for there are many more overlaps between them than we are aware of.

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sis of the 'socio-genetics' of our concepts, as practised by Norbert Elias in his *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1977), for the purpose of shifting from 'ideal types' to 'real types'.

[189] A case in point is Byrne's 'moral definition' of religion; cf. his contribution to this volume.

[190] See in particular the contributions of Beckford and Introvigne to this volume.

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