Vocabulary for the Study of Religions

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This booklet is a preview of Vocabulary for the Study of Religions. The format and paper used for this preview are not indicative of the final, printed version of the dictionary.
TITLES FOR PREVIEW

Action
Adaptation
Aesthetics
Afterlife
Agency
Agents (superhuman/counterintuitive)
Aggression
Agnosticism
Agriculture
Alchemy
Alienation
Allegory
Alterity
Altruism
Amulet
Analogy
Ancestors and Ancestor Worship
Androcentrism
Androgyny
Angel
Animal
Animism
Anthropocentrism
Anthropology of Religion
Anthropomorphism
Antinomianism
Apocalypse
Apocalypticism
Apollonian and Dionysian
Apologetics
Apostasy
Archetypes
Art
Asceticism
Astrology
Atheism
Attitude
Attribution (theory)
Authoritarianism
Authority
Authorship
Baptism
Behavior
Behaviorism
Belief(s)
Belonging
Biography
Blasphemy
Blessing and Curse
Body / Embodiment
Boundaries
Bricolage
Calendar and New Year
Canon / Canonization
Capital, Forms of
Capitalism
Cargo Cult
Catharsis
Causality
Chance
Charisma
Charismatic Movement
Cinema
Cinematography
Civil religion
Civil society
Class
Classification
Clothing
Cognition
Colonialism
Commercialization /
Commodification
Commitment
Communication
Communism
Community
Comparison
Concept of Religion
Conflict
Conflict Theory
Congregation / Congregationalism
Conscience
Consciousness
Conservatism
Contingency
Coping
Cosmos / Cosmologies
Covenant
Creationism
Critical Theory
Criticism and Critique (in, among
and of Religions)
Death and Burial
Deconstruction
Deconversion
Definitions of Religion
Demography
Demythologization
Deprivation
Deus otiosus
Deviance
Dialectic / Dialectical Materialism
Dialogism
Diaspora
Différance
Differentiation (Social)
Diffusion and dispersion
Disclosure
Discourse
Disenchantment
Dissociation
Dissonance (Cognitive)
Divination
Divine Kingship
Do ut des
Dogmatism
Drama
Dream
Dualism
Dying and Rising Gods
Economics of Religion
Economy
Ecstasy
Ecumenism
Education
Effervescence
Elective Affinity
Elite
Emotion
Empathy
Enlightenment
Environment
Epoché
Equality
Esoteric / Esotericism
Ethnicity
Ethnocentrism
Ethnography
Ethos
Euhemerism | Heresy | Martyrdom / Martyr
Everyday Life | Hermeneutics and Interpretation | Masks
Evil | Hero / Heroism | Material Culture
Evolution / Evolutionism | Hierarchy | Matriarchy / Patriarchy
Exchange | Hieros Gamos | Meaning
Exclusion | History | Measurements of Religion
Excommunication | Homo Religiosus | Media
Exegesis | Human Rights | Medicine
Existentialism | Humanism | Memory / Memorization
Exorcism | Humor | Mentalities
Explanation and Interpretation | Hunting | Metaphor
Extremism | Hybridity | Migration
Fairy tale | Icon / Iconography | Millenarianism / Millennialism
Faith | Iconoclasm | Mimesis
Fatalism / Fate | Identity | Minority (Religious)
Festival | Ideology | Miracle and Wonder
Fetish / Fetishism / Fetishization | Idol / Idolatry | Mission
Fideism | Implicit Religion | Modernization / Modernity
Fieldwork | Indig - Indigenous Religions | Money
Financing | Ineffability | Monism
Folk Religion | Initiation / Transformation | Monotheism
Food and Diet | Innovation | Mourning
Founder / Foundation | Insider / Outsider | Museality
Framework (Conceptual) | Institution | Music
Framing | Intellect - Intellectuals | Mystery
Freedom | Intoxication | Mysticism
Function / Functionalism | Intuition | Myth
Functions of Religion | Invisible Religion | Narrative
Fundamentalism | Irreligion | Nation / Nationalism
Funeral | Journey | Nativism
Geisteswissenschaft | Justice | Naturalism
Gender | Kinship | Nature
Genre | Knowledge | New Age
Gestures | Language | New Religious Movements
Ghost | Law | Nomads
Gift / Giving | Legitimacy / Legitimization | Numinous
Globalization | Liberalism | Object Relations
God / Goddess | Liminal / Liminality | Objectivity
Group | Literature | Occult / Occultism
Guilt | Luck | Oceanic feeling
Hallucinogens and Entheogens | Magic | Oedipus complex
Happiness | Marketplace Model | Ontology
Healing / Disease | Marriage | Orality
Health | | Orientalism / Occidentalism
Heaven / Hell | | Origins of Religion
Hegemony | | Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy
Henotheism | | Othering
Other-Worldly and This-Worldly
Pacifism
Paganism
Pain
Pantheism
Participant Observation
Peak Experience
Performance / Performativity
Person / Personality
Phenomenology of Religion
Philology
Philosophy of Religion
Pilgrimage
Pluralism and Plurality
Polemics
Politics / Political Science and Religion
Polytheism
Popular religion
Possession
Postmodernism
Poverty
Power
Prayer
Predestination
Prejudice
Priest / Priestess
Primitive / Primitivism
Private and Public Religion
Privatization
Progress
Projection
Property
Prophecy / Prophet
Proselytism / Proselytization
Protestant Ethic
Psychology of Religion
Purity/Impurity
Qualitative Research
Quantitative Research
Race / Racism
Radicalism
Rapture
Rational Choice Theory
Rationality
Reading and Writing
Reception Theory
Reductionism / Anti-Reductionism
Reincarnation
Relativism
Revelation
Revitalization Movement
Rhetoric
Rhythm
Rites of passage
Ritual
Role
Routinization
Sacred (the); Sacred and Profane
Sacrifice
Salvation
Sanctuary / Shrine / Temple
Savior
Scapegoat
Schism / Schismogenesis
Science
Scripture
Secrecy / Secret / Secret Societies
Sect / Sectarianism / Cult
Secular religion
Secular, Secularism
Secularization and De-
Secularization
Semiotics
Senses
Sexuality
Shaman / Shamanism
Shame
Sign / Symbol
Social Movement
Socialization
Society
Sociology of Religion
Soul
Sound
Space
Specialist
Speech Acts
Spirituality
State
Stratification
Structuralism
Structure
Subaltern
Sublimation
Sui Generis
Suicide
Syncretism
System / Systems Theory
Taboo
Teleology
Texts / Textuality
Theater / Theatricality
Theodicy
Theogony
Theology
Theories of Religion
Time
Tolerance
Totem
Tradition
Trance
Transcendence and Immanence
Translation
Transmission
Transnational / Transnationalism
Trauma
Trickster
Trope
Truth
Typology
Unconscious
Universals
Urbanization
Utopia
Values
Violence
Virtuality
Vision
Visual Arts and Culture
Votive / Votum
War / Warrior
Wilderness
Wisdom (Literature)
Witch / Witchcraft and Sorcerer /
Sorcery
World Religions
Worship
Apologetics has traditionally been linked to Christianity, Judaism, and one strand of the ancient Greek rhetorical tradition. In scholarly parlance the notion designates ancient Jewish and Christian works formally addressed to an external audience and undertaken in defence of the authors’ worldviews as response to external accusations having been made against them by non-Jewish and non-Christian authors of the Greco-Roman world. The phenomenon, however, has greater prevalence. From a comparative perspective it designates a wide array of works and strategies within any religious tradition which are produced as a defence of one’s own tradition against real or imagined threats stemming from rival worldviews.

Research History

Although the phenomenon of apologetics is found in an array of religions across the world, the concept has traditionally been closely linked to the history of Christianity, Judaism, and one particular strand of the ancient Greek tradition. The scholarly concept ‘apologetics’ is of modern origin, but it has a firm grounding in Greek culture (logos apologētikos, “speech suitable for defence”) and partially in Latin with the title of Tertullian’s famous Apology (Apologeticum) derived from the Greek term. The notion traditionally designates those works of Jewish and Christian provenance formally addressed to an external audience and worked out in defence of the authors’ respective worldviews as responses to previous external accusations having been made against them.

The emergence of Christian apologetic literature from the second century onwards is often said to build on a Jewish apologetic tradition dating back to the Ptolemaic Alexandrian period, having Philo of Alexandria (Hypothetika, extant only in fragments) and Flavius Josephus (Contra Apionem) as its prime exponents. A century ago Johannes Geffcken argued that the Christian apologetic literature was the heiress of the Jewish tradition. In recent years, however, the existence of such a monolithic Jewish apologetic tradition has been called into question. It was neither a uniform literary tradition, nor were the majority of works traditionally subsumed under the heading especially defensive in tone. Additionally, scholars have—following a ground-breaking article by Victor Tcherikover from 1956—increasingly come to acknowledge that the primary audience of many of these texts was Jewish. A work—like the Letter of Aristeas dating to around first century B.C.E.—may as part of its rhetorical staging make use of an explicit external addressee, but it is unlikely that this panegyric of Judaism ever succeeded in achieving a wide ‘pagan’ audience. Nor is it evident that the main target of the author was to reach a non-Jewish public. On the contrary, the majority of these writings seem to have had a predominantly internal purpose, serving the continuous forging and maintenance of a Jewish identity by encomiastically documenting the superiority of Judaism, while using Hellenistic cultural canons.

Recently, a similar shift in scholarship has taken place with regard to Christian apologetic literature. A growing number of scholars hold that although some of the Christian apologetic writings may have circulated among a ‘pagan’ audience, their primary aim was the internal identity-shaping among Christians. This is not to deny the apologetic function of these works, but it is important—against time-honored tradition—to acknowledge that apologetics cannot be confined to the external persuasion of one’s opponents only. It also has an important internal function both at the level of the individual and at the level of the group. In order to convince the external
world of the legitimacy or truth of one’s worldview (or, more likely, aspects of it), one must also persuade oneself.

**Apology as Genre**

Even though Plato’s *Apology*—in contrast to the later apologetic works of the Jewish and Christian tradition—represents the defence of a single person and not the defence of an entire worldview it has frequently been taken to be the epitome of an ‘apology,’ and thereby to constitute the generic matrix for the emergence of the later Jewish and Christian apologetic literature. Traditionally the discussion of apologetics has been closely related to the concomitant debate about the existence of a distinct, literary genre, i.e. the *apologia*. Recently the existence of such a genre has been called into question with respect to the Christian apologetic literature. A majority of scholars is now prone to deny the existence of a distinct apologetic genre. Averil Cameron is representative of this change of view when she encourages scholars to examine apologetics as a mode of writing in terms of tone or method of argument rather than as a distinct genre (Cameron 2002: 221–227). The persuasiveness of this view notwithstanding, it is hard to deny the existence of a genre that was continually undergoing transformations as cultural and social contexts changed. Although there is only a paucity of evidence in the rhetorical and epistolary handbooks there is enough to substantiate the existence of an apologetic genre from the end of the fifth century B.C.E. onwards.

**Apologia in the Greek Tradition**

The term *apologia* and the corresponding verb *apologeisthai* appear for the first time in the orations of Antiphon of Rhamnus (480–411 B.C.E.) who wrote speeches in defence of persons being accused. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle refers to apologetic as the counterpart of charges made in forensic speech and as a distinct type of the forensic genre (1.3.3; 1.10.1). Similarly, in the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*—from the early third century B.C.E.—apologetic is emphasised as a distinct genre connected with forensic oratory. It is the “refutation of errors and offences of which particular persons have been charged or suspected” (1426b, 27–29). In the subsequent tradition of rhetorical handbooks by Hermagoras, Cicero, Quintilian, and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*, apologetics was mostly concerned with forensic oratory. It designated those forms of judicial speech in which an orator spoke in defence of a case brought before a court responsible for ruling on matters belonging to the past. In addition to the information gained from the handbooks, a number of apologetic speeches have been preserved. They give an impression of the range of apologetics as well as examples of how defensive speeches were held in court. One of the most prominent examples of the genre is the extensive literature occasioned by the court case against Socrates. Apart from the extant apologies of Plato and Xenophon several works—now lost—are known to have been composed by other authors. In addition to apologetic oratory as a subspecies of the forensic genre, Pseudo-Demetrius’ *On Epistolary Types* (first century B.C.E. or C.E.) makes it clear that apologetics also occurred in the context of letters. The constitutive element is once again the repudiation of charges raised.

**The Jewish and Christian Background**

It has been obvious for scholarship to examine the forensic rhetorical tradition in order to find the background for the later Jewish and Christian apologetic writings. This attempt has been even more apparent with regard to those Christian works which—whether fictitiously or not—have been formally addressed to the Roman emperor in his role as judge, since they are rhetorically situated in a court setting. However, not all works traditionally subsumed under the apologetic umbrella
rhetorically employ the court setting. And those that do are strictly speaking not forensic speeches in the sense of being reproductions of actual speeches held before a panel of judges. This calls for another explanation. Jonathan Goldstein has pointed to the importance of the apologetic *demegoria*, which unlike the forensic speech is directed towards the assembly and is concerned with the expediency and future course of its audience (Goldstein 1968, 102–117). Numerous *apologiae* have been preserved which document how apologetic elements can be used both in the context of propaganda and self-apology. Although forensic features were instrumental to the formation of the apologetic *demegoria*, it represents—similar to Plato's *Apology*—an extension of the genre. This extension can account for the fact that we do not only find salient protreptic elements (pertaining to the genre of *protreptikoi logoi*, i.e. hortatory literature) in the later Jewish and Christian apologetic writings but also that the works which are not of a strictly forensic nature could still be classified as apologetic, even from a generic point of view. The continuous modulations of the genre and the fact that an apologetic tone and method are found in other types of Jewish and Christian literature point to the prevalence of the phenomenon.

**The Prevalence of Apologetics**

The pervasiveness of apologetics is also evident from the fact that as a particular type of literature it reappeared in the Christian tradition from the seventeenth century onwards. Similar to the ancient literature, modern apologetic Christian literature is a response to challenges posed by the existence of rival worldviews—be they, for instance, threats thought to emanate from the natural sciences, direct attacks on Christianity from contemporary philosophy, or alternative worldviews prompted by other religions. The prevalence of the phenomenon in contemporary Christianity calls for a wider comparative perspective. Despite the term's traditionally intimate connection with scholarship on ancient Judaism and Christianity, the focus on apologetics in the narrow context of Judaism and Christianity and the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition has been detrimental to a greater acknowledgement of the phenomenon. If we take apologetics to constitute an intrinsic element in the continual forging of identity—both at the level of the individual and at the level of the group—we may reasonably extend the use of the term to a general concept in the comparative study of religion.

From an evolutionary point of view, apologetics is likely to be found in those religious contexts in which different groups compete with rivals about the legitimacy of their worldviews, i.e. in the context of secondary religions, or in cultural contexts in which religious groups are faced with challenges from competing worldviews—whether in the form of direct accusations, or as challenges against one's worldview stemming from the existence of a competing worldview that by virtue of its alternative casting of reality calls for a response. In addition, apologetics is more likely to be found in religious contexts that place emphasis on the doctrinarian mode of religiosity, since it is commonly controversies over basic tenets of the worldview that are being attacked. Apologetics is therefore often also closely connected to polemics, although the two phenomena do not necessarily constitute two sides of the same coin. Polemics may appear as an aggressive form of self-defence, since it implies a reaction in the form of a direct attack on traditions held to be external. Apologetics, in contrast, presupposes that one is responding to accusations or challenges previously raised against one's worldview. It is, for example, not coincidental that the emergence of particular Jewish and Christian apologetic works is inextricably connected to external accusations having been made against the two religions from representatives of Greek and Roman culture. At the same time, however, it is significant to acknowledge how the response to these external accusations is also—and perhaps more importantly—a response to
Defining Apologetics

From an emic point of view, we may define apology in the narrow generic sense to designate a particular number of works within the Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian tradition that were directly formulated against explicit accusations from the outside world and which share a number of discursive properties with regard to content, form, and function. As such, apology is inextricably connected to the genres of forensic and deliberative speech. From an etic perspective, however, we may take apologetics in the broader sense to designate a wide array of works and strategies within any religious tradition which are produced as a defence of one’s own tradition against real or imagined threats stemming from rival worldviews.

We may further distinguish between two forms of apologetics, one developing as a response to competing interpretations within one’s own worldview and held to be incompatible with it (cf. the use of terms such as orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy), and the other prompted by the existence of a competing worldview. A further distinction can be made with respect to the latter category. Apologetics may develop as a response to direct attacks on one’s own worldview, but it may also occur as a response provoked by the sheer existence of a competing worldview. Defined in this broader manner, apologetics cannot be confined to ancient Judaism and Christianity. It is a far more prevalent phenomenon characteristic of all strands within secondary religions that place emphasis on the doctrinarian mode of religiosity. Since the onset of modernity, apologetics is also found in a number of other cultural realms such as, for instance, politics where single actors or groups are responding to accusations or challenges formulated against their worldviews. Finally, our overall understanding of apologetics may appear paradoxical by virtue of the tension held to exist in the works between explicit addressees (i.e. critics from the ‘outside world’) and actual recipients (i.e. fellow believers). The tension, however, disappears if one takes the argument to be of a quantitative and not a categorical nature. Some readers of the ‘outside world’ may, in fact, have read apologetic works, but the majority of recipients of this kind of literature have always been fellow believers seeking support for their worldview in a seeming defence of it against rival and frequently more dominant worldviews.

Anders Klostergaard Petersen

[This article has been shortened for the preview.]
Creationism

Any theist who takes God to be the Creator and everything else to be a creature, could be considered a creationist. Some theologians and historians of science have argued that a generic creationist perspective implies that one should expect the world to be orderly (reflecting God's trustworthiness) and contingent (reflecting the Creator's free choices), and thus justifies the combination of mathematics and experimentation that has become characteristic of modern science.

“Creationism” has come to refer to a far more specific cluster of beliefs. This more specific creationism flows from the natural theologies of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Natural theologies were replete with arguments from observations of intricate and purposeful natural phenomena to the conclusion that there must have been a Designer. Discerning agency behind natural phenomena is a useful and common human propensity, which makes the appeal of creationism quite intelligible (e.g., Recker 2010). However, with the work of Charles Darwin (especially On the Origin of Species, 1859), preceded by the expanded time frame and uniformitarian explanations of the geologists (e.g., Charles Lyell's Principles of Geology, 1830–1833) there came the rise of an effective evolutionary understanding of natural history. Natural explanations of adaptations in nature made the design argument superfluous. In Darwin's context this was to a large extent a debate with scientifically respectable opponents such as Richard Owen, as the design argument had served science for a long time. The early stage of the debate was more about science, whereas later creationism is more about the Bible. In Darwin's time, some religious believers were not troubled, as one could always consider God the designer of the process as such rather than of individual outcomes. One could also hold that belief in God is not dependent upon such arguments. However, many of those religiously committed to the design argument rejected evolutionary explanations. Thus, from its very beginning creationism is marked by a strong opposition to evolutionary explanations, and a desire to preserve a design argument. However, creationism was also a response to nineteenth-century modernism, with its social and theological dimensions. Whereas modernists appreciated biblical criticism (which had, among much else, noted the presence of two different and mutually-inconsistent creation stories in the early chapters of Genesis) and the discovery of other ancient literature from the Middle East, the anti-modernists emphasized the historical accuracy of scripture and the importance of doctrine.

“Creationism” has thus come to refer to a family of positions that share most of the following features: (a) belief in God as creator of the natural world; (b) the rejection of the idea that God has created by natural, evolutionary processes (an alternative position that is called “evolutionary theism”); (c) and thus belief in the insufficiency of evolutionary, natural, evolutionary processes to have brought about all adaptations in life forms on Earth. Furthermore, (d) belief in the truth and inerrancy of Scripture; (e) a view of religion that gives cognitive claims a prominent place in religion (in contrast to liberal believers, who might stress morality over doctrine; and (f) various other anti-modernist elements were all part of the creationist package.

As an illustration of the larger package, one might turn to a debate in the American House of Representatives, after the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999. Officially, this debate on June 16, 1999, was about juvenile offenders and measures to control the possession of guns. Tom DeLay, a leading Republican, claimed that the availability of guns was not the issue. Juvenile violence was a consequence of broken families, day care centres where children live according to the law of the jungle, TV and computer games, small
families due to sterilization and contraception, abortions, and “because our school systems teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized out of some primordial soup of mud.” The driving issue is modernity with its social practices and values. Explaining evolutionary insights, providing new data, refuting apparent counter-examples will not tame the antagonism, because science education does not address the real concerns involved. The basic opposition is one pitting religious views that reject modernity against religious and secular outlooks that accept and appreciate modernity. For both opponents and adherents the rejection of evolution is part of a much larger package, though a part with major symbolic importance.

Creationism takes various forms. The major historian of creationism, Ronald Numbers (2005: 10f.) distinguishes two varieties in the late nineteenth century that both could be called “Old Earth Creationism.” Some took the days of Genesis to refer to much longer periods. Others took it that the six days of Genesis describe a restoration of a creation that had fallen into chaos. A third, minority, position was the “Young Earth Creationism” that considered the days to be days of twenty-four hours, and attributed fossils to the flood that came many generations after Adam and Eve. It was only around 1960 that Young Earth Creationism gained prominence, presenting itself not only as the better interpretation of the Bible but also as the scientifically stronger position. Thus, from that time on we also have “scientific creationism.” In the creationists’ self-understanding, they do not reject science, but rather argue for a better science, which would be biblical rather than naturalistic. In this period, their understanding of the Bible has become more rigid and literal, e.g., with respect to the “days.”

Subsequent developments were often triggered by legal situations, as the issues tended to focus on the teaching of biology and understandings of the separation of church and state in American public schools. In the 1990s there emerged a variant that presented itself as arguing for “Intelligent Design,” without explicit references to scripture. In response to the various waves of creationism aiming at science education in public schools, others have organized themselves against creationist claims (e.g., the National Center for Science Education).

“Creationism” in the more specific sense is not to be equated with orthodoxy, though its adherents would like to see it thus. It is rather a movement that combines a view of meaningful religious language as descriptive with an anti-modernist social and religious agenda. Advocates of such creationism profit from the association with the generic meaning of creationism, but classic Christian authors such as Augustine (fourth and fifth century) were far more open to a non-literalist understanding of scripture and a more complex understanding of God’s creative activity through natural or “secondary” causes (e.g., McMullin 2011).

Creationism in its more specific forms has been copied elsewhere, and for many evangelicals, being against evolution has become a standard of true faith. It has also been appropriated in other religious traditions. For instance, the Turkish creationist Harun Yahya makes extensive use of the work of young earth creationists, while drawing on their anti-modernism as an anti-Western vocabulary.

Willem B. Drees

[This article has been shortened for the preview.]
Disclosure

Derived from the Latin *dis-clausis*, disclosure refers literally to the exposure or opening of things that have been hidden or concealed. In a religious context disclosure is the exposure, opening, or revelation of some unseen sacred presence. Disclosure can be understood as the flipside and the necessary counterpart to *secrecy*, or the intentional closure or concealment of knowledge. As Georg Simmel famously observed in his sociological study of secrecy, disclosure or betrayal is the logical opposite of the secret, which is hidden knowledge that is awaiting being made known to another: “The secret contains a tension that is dissolved in the moment of its revelation. This moment constitutes the acme in the development of the secret: all of its charms are once more gathered in it and brought to a climax, . . . The secret, too, is full of the consciousness that it can be betrayed; that one holds the power of surprises, turns of fate, joy, destruction . . . For this reason, the secret is surrounded by the possibility and temptation of its betrayal” (1964: 333–34; see Urban 1998). Disclosure lies close to the heart of what is meant by “religion” itself. As Michael Taussig observes, religion is a matter of a powerful yet invisible presence, the power of what is unseen or concealed. Religious myth, textual revelation, and ritual practice are often precisely about the disclosure of that concealed presence: “Above all, religion is the secret, carefully concealed and revealed” (1998: 357).

This entry will discuss four key kinds of the revelation of hidden knowledge: first, *divine disclosures*, or revelations from the spiritual world to human recipients; second, *secret disclosures*, or the intentional communication of esoteric knowledge among initiated members of a closed community; third, *aesthetic disclosures*, or the revelation of concealed knowledge through sacred art and other forms; and fourth, *scandalous disclosures*, or the revelation of hidden facts about a religious community by ex-members or critics. A few key examples to illustrate each of these four forms will be given.

**Divine Disclosures: Apocalypse, Hierophany, and Vision**

In its broadest religious sense disclosure refers to the exposure of things believed to be superhuman, supernatural, or transcendent. The literal meaning of “apocalypse” is the revelation of unknown things. Mircea Eliade’s famous concept of hierophany, or the manifestation of the divine, refers to the sacred as it appears to burst forth into the human and material realm. In the case of the Book of Revelation, apocalypse refers to the revelation of events to come, and specifically events relating to the end of time. Similar divine disclosures are recounted by later Christian saints and mystics. Julian of Norwich recounted her “Showings” from the year 1373, when she experienced a series of intense visionary encounters with the hitherto unseen presence of Christ (Colledge and Walsh 1977). Examples from other religions are Joseph Smith’s visions of the angel Moroni and the Hindu saint Ramakrishna’s intense series of visions of Kali and other deities (Kripal 1998).

**Secret Disclosures: Esoteric Knowledge and Transmission**

If disclosure can refer to revelations from the divine realm to the human, it can also refer to the transmission of secret knowledge from one human being to another. In this sense disclosure is central to various esoteric traditions and secret societies, ranging from Kabbalah to Hindu and Buddhist Tantra to Sufism and indigenous communities (Wolfsen 1999; Urban 1998). Perhaps the most famous example of secret disclosures in the modern Western context is Freemasonry, particularly
in its most elaborate forms such as the Scottish Rite. As Albert Pike puts it in his class work, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, “Secrecy is indispensable to a Mason of whatever degree. It is the first . . . lesson taught to the Entered Apprentice,” and the greatest commandment of the initiate is “I will always hail, ever conceal and never reveal” (Urban 2008). Ironically, the entire hierarchy of initiations and grades that makes up the Masonic brotherhood center precisely on the disclosure of secret knowledge. The very point of this indispensable secrecy is the concomitant revelation of ever more profound pieces of esoteric knowledge as the Mason ascends through the increasingly elaborate thirty-three grades of the Scottish Rite.

Aesthetic Disclosures: Manifestations of the Secret through Art

One of the most important forms of disclosure in many traditions is the use of art and other forms of visual culture to conceal and simultaneously to disclose esoteric knowledge. As Mary Nooter suggests in her study of African traditional art (1993), masks, emblems and other works are used to draw attention to the very secret knowledge even as they serve to conceal its actual content.

Scandalous Disclosures

Finally, there is the revelation of information about religious traditions that was never intended to be disclosed and that is considered embarrassing, threatening, or illegal. The last decades of the twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first centuries have seen numerous examples of such scandalous disclosures. Perhaps the most infamous was the revelation of child sexual abuse and cover-ups by an array of priests and bishops in the Catholic Church. But arguably some of the most fascinating cases of secrecy and disclosure have centered on the controversial new religion, the Church of Scientology, established in 1953 by American science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard. Since its inception, Scientology has been surrounded by intense controversy, particularly because of the secrecy surrounding its advanced levels of training yet, there has been disclosure of these secret teachings by a variety of ex-members, media sources, and websites. Indeed, from the early 1950s down to Janet Reitman’s 2011 book, *Inside Scientology*, much of the debate surrounding this movement has centered on its claim to powerful (and expensive) esoteric knowledge and the claims of various critics to expose the scandalous “true secrets” of Scientology (Urban 2008; 2011).

Hugh Urban

[This article has been shortened for the preview.]
Functions of Religion

The functions of religion can be imagined as answering the question “What does religion do?” As McGuire notes, “A functional definition of religion emphasizes what the religion does for the individual of the social group. Accordingly, religion is defined by the social functions it fulfills” (2002: 11). The perennial problem with functionalism is that it makes religion into an actor itself. But in fact, religion does not act by itself. Rather, it requires human actors, and they must be understood in terms of the power relations that inform the very construction of religion. Furthermore, religion serves individuals as well as the group, and the functions of religion for individuals, such as providing meaning, are different from the functions of religion for the group, such as keeping the group together.

Let us first briefly revisit some of the foundational thinking on the functions of religion. The classic starting place is Émile Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (2001 [1912]), which presents religion as serving the positive, social function of strengthening social cohesion. Influenced by Durkheim, Talcott Parsons (1954, 1967, 1970), for example, stresses the integrative function of religion in society.

A contemporary expression of the Durkheimian and Parsonian approach to religion is being played out in the United Kingdom, where the government has recognized the potential of religion for unifying the state and has attempted to harness this feature in the service of the state. James Beckford documents this process in his discussion of religion in the public sphere, noting the shift in state discourse from “religion” to “faith communities” as a means of using shared values to build cohesion (Beckford 2010). As governments throughout Western Europe grapple with increased religious diversity and economically challenging circumstances, they are seeking to mobilize religion to reinforce social bonds and, more, to perform some of the functions that have been appropriated by the state during the past fifty years.

Karl Marx also considered the function of religion, characterizing religion as an opiate that dulled the senses and kept the oppressed from rising up. In a famous passage he states that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx 1984 [1843]). His criticism of religion as false consciousness is part of his criticism of society generally: “Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again” (Marx 1984).

Yet subsequent history has shown that religion can also be harnessed in the service of emancipation. Liberation theology is the most frequently cited example against Marx’s thesis. Emerging from Latin America in the 1960s, liberation theology combined Christian ethics with Marxist ideas about the redistribution of wealth (see Gutiérrez 1988). There are many other examples of religion functioning to emancipate rather than to subjugate. For example, George Elliot Clark argues that the hymn “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” so often sung as a Christmas favorite, was actually embedded with coded messages about escape for black slaves in the American South (Clark 2011). Women’s spirituality groups and Wicca have created religious spaces in which women have been able to create their own and alternative narratives as well as escape from patriarchal beliefs and practices.

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2003 [1958]) Max Weber, another major “founding father” of social science, studied the link between Protestant theology and the rise of capitalism. Weber noted that Protestantism, especially Calvinism, sought worldly signs of chosenness, notably the accumulation of wealth. Religion functioned to support the capitalist system. In the Sociology of Religion (1963) Weber
shifted his focus to the individual, noting that religion served to provide meaning in the face of, above all, suffering.

Often missing from analyses of the function of religion, whether positive or negative, is the recognition that religion can both effect and impede change. For example, religion functioned to liberate slaves but also to oppress them. If liberation theology uses Christianity to emancipate oppressed people in Latin America, Christianity had long been used to colonize the same people. There are always tensions within religions. Where the Metropolitan Church in Toronto espouses the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Canada, other Christian groups in Canada oppose that recognition (Dickey Young 2012). Similarly, the same religion that is mobilized to support the abuse of women through submission can be mobilized to combat violence against women (see Nason-Clark 2009). The view that religion functions either wholly positively or wholly negatively is simplistic.

One leading contemporary topic is the relation of religion to violence. The so-called new atheists, most prominently Richard Dawkins (2006), see religion as so inherently violent that the only hope for humankind is to eliminate it altogether. An only mildly less polemical view of religion identifies “good religion” and “bad religion,” a distinction that recently is used most often of Islam, which is deemed a bad religion. But again, this classification is simplistic and ignores the complexity of real, lived religion (see Orsi 2003).

In Social Theory and Religion James Beckford adopts what he calls moderate constructionism. The basic premise is that “far from being a fixed or unitary phenomenon, religion is a social construct that varies in meaning across time and place” (Beckford 2003: 7). The functions of religion depend on the context. Religion is thus not a stand-alone category with an otherworldly function. Rather, religion is a part of the social context in which we find ourselves.

In Borderlines (2004) Daniel Boyarin argues that in order to create itself, Christianity had to construct the notions of both religion and Christianity. Boyarin goes further and argues that Judaism itself was a Christian invention. Here “religion” functions to demarcate Christianity from Judaism. The notions of orthodoxy and heresy were used by both Christians and Jews to construct the boundaries between these religions, where “religion” was actually a non-existent category prior to the need for its invention. Geography and ethnicity, not religion, were used to differentiate groups of people until religion was successfully demarcated. Jews themselves did not regard being Jewish as religious until after the Middle Ages.

The fluidity of the functions of religion reflects the human agency involved in the process. Religion itself does not act. Persons do. Following the work of McGuire (2008), Heelas and Woodhead (2005), and Orsi (2005, 2003), religion as lived—that is, the mundane, day-to-day ways in which persons act religiously—must be considered. Religion can serve multiple functions. It can provide a source of identity (“I am an evangelical Christian”), motivation for action (“therefore I am called to witness”), an interpretive framework (“It is God’s will”), and comfort as well as anxiety and discomfort.

Similarly, the functions of religion can also be understood as being related to political action and the state, which, as mentioned above, can deploy religion in its service. The recent rise of values talk and the transformation of religion into “cultural heritage” bear witness to some of the ways in which religion functions at the service of the state. Religion can form the basis of state identity—“we are a Christian nation”—to create a sense of “we” in the face of “them,” or, in other words, to establish or mark the boundaries between us and them. The state can reshape and recreate these narratives of “we” by partnering with religion, especially with the historically religious majorities of a nation. Of course the very creation of a “we” necessarily creates a “them,” which in turn subverts the possibility of the social cohesion that is the state aim.

A careful analysis of religion requires a consideration of the various areas in which religion and society mix. Linda Woodhead (2011a) points out
that these spheres are not neatly differentiated but rather blend into one other, relate to one other in no particular order, and shift in importance. Woodhead’s stress on complex spheres is useful for thinking about the functions of religion. One caution offered by Woodhead is that religion is entangled in domains that vary from society to society. Domains also need to be adjusted to the historical context. As Boyarin argues, the function of religion in the early years of Christianity differed from the function of religion today.

To grasp the functions of religion, we need to study the many areas of social life: home and family, health and death, education, media, culture, the market, the state and law, leisure, violence, public spaces, welfare, and service organizations (see Woodhead 2011b; Casanova 1994). We may also want to consider a temporal perspective—ideally, the lifespan of an individual, a group, or even a nation. We may likewise want to consider a spatial perspective, beginning with a street, a village, or even a website (Knott 2005, 2008). Both Woodhead and Knott offer tools to take the varying locations of religion, both social and material, more seriously. As an example, let us consider welfare.

In Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe (2010) Anders Bäckström and Grace Davie et al. present the results of their eight-country Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective Project. They show how religion functions in so-called welfare states. In Finland and Greece religion offers welfare services that are personal, engaged, and direct, in contrast to the more bureaucratic approach of the state. The editors ask whether religion functions as a safety valve to support the state and, if so, whether this role is appropriate. In Italy religion functions to reinforce a patriarchal order that places women at the center of service provision through expectations of their roles in the family. At the same time it is nuns who have challenged the traditional responsibility put on women in caregiving. They propose an alternative, radical voice to welfare provision, challenging its status as strictly a women’s domain and as one that exploits women.

The exploration of welfare and religion also reveals the extent to which the realms mentioned overlap. In each case studied by Bäckström and Davie, the functions of religion shifted, depending on the function of the state. Thus there was symmetry between the amount of welfare support provided by the state and the amount engaged in by religious organizations. Moreover, the functions of the family were also tied to religion, the state, and welfare, most obviously in Italy but elsewhere as well. In France there was little awareness by state officials of the function of religion in welfare provision, yet the Catholic Church provided significant services to the community. It is not that the state causes religion to provide welfare or that religion causes the state to do so but that there is an integral relation between them, and between them and other spheres like the family, that results in a certain configuration.

The example of welfare raises the question not only of what the functions of religion are, but also of what they should be. The answer varies with the context, as again illustrated by the research of Bäckström and Davie. In Italy the Church sees its role as superior to that of the state and sees religion as the backbone of society and as intertwined with the state (Frisina 2010). In Norway the two kingdoms doctrine of Lutheran theology (which grants autonomy to the state from the church) sees the functions of religion and of the state as distinct, even though the Church of Norway is a state church.

Finally, the work of Bäckström and Davie et al. illustrates the contested nature of the functions of religion. The ways in which religion functions in a society are fully implicated in power relations. The contraction of the functions of religion in one domain may mean not the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere but a regrouping. So religion must be studied—as dynamic rather than fixed.

The study of religion in the case of welfare illustrates the complex nature of the function of
religion. The study of religion in the case of education or family life would show the same. What must be recognized is the array of domains in which religion operates and also the blurring of the domains. In examining the functions of religion, one must recognize the shifting, local, and contingent nature of social life.

Lori Beaman

[This article has been shortened for the preview.]
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