The assigned focus of this anthology is the “distinctiveness of a monotheistic ethic.” The inquiry seeks a difference that matters, and its minimal aim is to clarify whether or not monotheism creates particular norms for human behavior. Distinctiveness is a category of comparison and relativism. An entity is meaningfully distinctive when analyzed against other similar entities and in terms of a specific and important trait or set of traits. Examining the distinctiveness of a monotheistic ethic compares religions and their ethics and asks if monotheism generates an ethic that is consequentially different from the ethic of non-monotheistic religions.

To be analytically useful, the question about a monotheistic ethic must begin with—and its answer must then test—the assumption that monotheism is the key factor that shapes the religion’s ethic. Correlation of particular behaviors with monotheistic religions is a first step, but it neither demonstrates nor assesses the role a religion’s theistic conviction—as opposed to, for instance, institutional or social structure, community history, or surrounding culture—plays in generating and justifying conduct. To identify what is distinctive about a monotheistic ethic, it will be important both to define monotheism in theory and also to examine how it shapes, informs, motivates, and characterizes ethical attitudes and practices in discrete traditions and communities.

Comparison benefits from clarity about its question’s key components and categories. This article offers some preliminary considerations of the terms “religion,” “monotheism,” and “ethic(s)” and reviews recent comparative data and scholarship that may contribute to the inquiry. These materials may help to identify possible parameters and potential pitfalls of this inquiry.

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1 A comparison of a monotheistic ethic to a non-theistic ethic would entail a much broader comparison between types of systems—religious and non-religious—rather than between discrete phenomena within a single systemic structure.
Religion

Since monotheism comes to expression primarily, if not exclusively, through the agency of religion, it is useful to begin by considering the characteristics of religion.² A helpful starting point is Melford Spiro’s well-known definition: “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”³ This definition casts religion as a social institution with “normative” beliefs and “prescriptive values” and identifies religion’s distinguishing variable as “culturally postulated superhuman beings.” Spiro argues that a religion’s postulated superhuman beings and the patterns of human interaction with them are culturally shaped or determined. Religion’s institutional character means that its speech and behavior are part of a common possession of ideas and values rather than private, individual, or idiosyncratic. Humans’ patterned interactions can take myriad forms: prayer, ritual, obedience, meditation, trances, charity, veneration, imitation, consumption, textual study, healing, illness, fasting, asceticism, exorcism, pacifism, violence, and war, to name just a few.

Religions postulate an objective, true, and humanly unalterable cosmic order of existence, which establishes the prerequisites of human experience and proper human attitudes and action. Because religions understand the normative structure of the cosmos, they claim to show human beings how to live in conformity to that order and thereby how either to prevent or repair a breach with it. In religion, human interaction with superhuman beings serves one or both of these two broad purposes.

A religion’s knowledge of the normative nature and structure of the cosmic order is particular rather than generic. Since a religion’s superhuman beings created, discovered, or revealed that order, full and correct knowledge and understanding of it necessarily are highly specific, if not exclusive, to the religion itself. Each religion has its own specific sources of authority—texts, revelations, sages, enlightened ones, prophets, chains of

² Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, “Introduction: the debate about pagan monotheism,” in One God: Pagan monotheism in the Roman Empire, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–15, at p. 4: “It is necessary to define monotheism not simply as an intellectual construct but as a religious phenomenon. This in turn raises the question of defining what religion is and assessing the role that it played in ancient society.”