Brent Nongbri


One sees from the outset that the author has a shaky grasp of the history of the study of religion when he informs us that “[f]or much of the past two centuries [till 2013], both popular and academic thought has assumed that religion is a universal human phenomenon, a part of the ‘natural’ human experience that is essentially the same across cultures and throughout history” (p. 1). Apart from the author’s misunderstanding of the meaning of “essential,” which means far more than “common” or even “key,” his claim is preposterous.

Let us take two examples of works on religion that could hardly be more central to the modern study of religion: E.B. Tylor’s Primitive Religion (1871) and Emile Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912 in French; 1915 in English). Nongbri himself cites neither in his nearly one hundred pages of notes and references.

Tylor asks: “Are there, or have there ever been, tribes of men so low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatever? This is practically the question of the universality of religion, which for so many centuries has been affirmed and denied, with a confidence in striking contrast to the imperfect evidence on which both affirmation and denial have been based.”¹ Tylor proceeds to name leading authorities who deny the universality of religion. Yet Tylor does not conclude that religion is in fact universal, as Nongbri would have us expect. Rather, he more modestly argues against those who deny the universality of religion. He does so on the grounds of the narrowness of their definitions. He proposes instead what he calls a “minimum” definition of religion: the belief in “Spiritual Beings,” or gods as personalities.

Yet Tylor does not claim that by even his lowest common denominator religion is universal. Rather, he confines himself to cultures about which there is sufficient information: “Here, so far as I can judge from the immense mass of accessible evidence, we have to admit that the belief in spiritual beings appears among all low races with whom we have attained to thoroughly intimate acquaintance.”²

When it comes to modern religion, Tylor hardly assumes, as Nongbri would have us expect, any breezy universality of religion. For Tylor, modern religion

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² Tylor, Primitive Religion, 9 (emphasis in the original).
is merely possible, not automatic. It must be reconciled with science. And it is so different from primitive religion that there is barely any universal definition of religion.

One of the main critics of Tylor was Durkheim, who faults Tylor on the same grounds that Tylor faults others: for too narrow a definition of religion. As Durkheim writes of Tylor’s definition: “In the first place, there are great religions from which the idea of gods and spirits is absent, or at least where it plays only a secondary and minor role. This is the case with Buddhism.”  \(^3\)

Nongbri tells us that the conventional characterization of religion, which he disputes, is that religion is an inner, private affair: “For now, it is enough to note that seeing talk of multiple religions (or religions) in medieval texts is not an indication of the antiquity of the modern notion of religion. That is to say, the Latin word religio, and even the English word ‘religion’ (or ‘religioun’), existed before these definitions of religion as an internal, private experience arose” (p. 21).

Nongbri attributes to Protestantism the characterization of religion as inner and private. No doubt that focus, found in mysticism throughout history and around the world, reflects the baleful influence of European, post-1500 Protestantism. Mary Douglas, for one, does attribute the modern characterization of religion to Protestantism, but for her, who is never mentioned, the Protestant, which means anti-Catholic, focus refers to the downplaying of ritual – a separate criterion.

Nongbri also attributes the stress on religion as private to the distinction, arising from the Enlightenment, between the public sphere of life and the private one. This distinction, which goes back to the eighteenth century and so postdates Protestantism by centuries, is embodied in the American doctrine of the separation of church and state. That notion is taken by Americans from John Locke (\textit{Letter on Toleration} [1689]). In other words, there is no state religion, so that religion, while still permitted, is restricted to the private domain.

Yet religion as private is not new. To give just one example, in the Roman Empire mystery cults existed alongside worship of the Emperor, though admittedly not in place of Emperor worship. To quote from an expert overview of the subject, one which aptly cites Apuleius’s \textit{The Golden Ass}: “It is this idea, that mystery cults offered those who took part in them the opportunity to experience direct, unmediated contact with the divine, that makes best sense of what