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Reconstructing “Religion” from the Bottom Up

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Abstract

This article claims to uncover the core problematics that have made the debate on defining and conceptualizing “religion” so difficult and argues that this makes it possible to move beyond radical deconstruction towards *reconstructing* the concept for scholarly purposes. The argument has four main steps. Step 1 consists of establishing the nature of the entity “religion” as a *reified imaginative formation*. Step 2 consists of identifying *the basic dilemma* with which scholars have been struggling: the fact that, on the one hand, definitions and conceptualizations do not seem to work unless they stay sufficiently close to commonly held prototypes, while yet, on the other hand, those prototypes are grounded in monotheistic, more specifically Christian, even more specifically Protestant, theological biases about “true” religion. The first line of argument leads to crypto-theological definitions and conceptualizations, the second to a radical deconstruction of the very concept of “religion.” Step 3 resolves the dilemma by identifying an *unexamined assumption*, or *problematic “blind spot,”* that the two lines of argument have in common: they both think that “religion” stands against “the secular.” However, the historical record shows that these two defined themselves not just against one another but, simultaneously, against a *third* domain (referred to by such terms as “magic” or “superstition”). The structure is therefore not dualistic but triadic. Step 4 consists of replacing common assumptions about how “religion” emerged in the early modern period by an interpretation that explains not just its emergence but its logical *necessity*, at that time, for dealing with the crisis of comparison caused by

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colonialist expansion. “Religion” emerged as the *tertium comparationis* — or, in technically more precise language, the “pre-comparative *tertium*” — that enabled comparison between familiar (monotheist, Christian, Protestant) forms of belief and modes of worship and unfamiliar ones (associated with “pagan” superstition or magic). If we restore the term to its original function, this allows us to reconstruct “religion” as a scholarly concept that not just avoids but *prevents* any slippage back to Christian theology or ethnocentric bias.

Keywords

concept of religion – definition of religion – imagination – *tertium comparationis* – comparison – superstition – magic – prototypes – deconstruction – reification

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... ainsi tous vos raisonnemens, toutes vos connoissances, sont fondées sur des images tracées dans votre cerveau: vous ne vous en apercevez pas; mais arrêtez-vous un moment pour y songer, & alors vous voyez que ces images sont la base de toutes vos notions... (Voltaire)¹

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Taking up Kevin Schilbrack’s challenge “After We Deconstruct Religion, Then What?” (2013), this article claims to uncover the core problematics that have made it so difficult to resolve the debate on defining and conceptualizing “religion.” My objective in the following pages is *not* to provide yet another descriptive overview of the debate and the various positions that are possible within it, as this has been done already many times before (e.g., Spiro 1966; Lambert 1991; Clarke and Byrne 1993; Blasi 1998; Wilson 1998; Platvoet 1999a; Snoek 1999; McKinnon 2002; Stausberg and Gardiner 2016). Rather, I will attempt to move straight to the heart of the problem and focus on the issues that all participants

1 Voltaire’s contribution to the entry “Imagination, Imaginer” in Diderot and d’Alembert 1765: 561 (cf. Zollna 1990: 8–9): “... thus all your reasonings and all your knowledge are based upon images traced in your brain: you are not aware of it, but just stop for a moment to think about it, and you [will] see that these images are the foundation of all your notions.”

in the debate have been struggling with. On that basis, I will build up an argument in four steps that fully respects and integrates the radical deconstructionist position but goes beyond it to ultimately leave it behind. I argue that “religion” can be *reconstructed* from the bottom up as a meaningful scholarly category, but only if we take the well-known slogan “always historicize!” much more seriously than most deconstructionist critics have taken it (McCutcheon 2001: 7). The problematic nature of “religion” cannot be resolved unless we approach it from a perspective that closely integrates theoretical with historical analysis.

Step 1: “Religion” as a Reified Imaginative Formation

My argument is grounded in a systematic review of the scholarly literature on the concept and definition of “religion,” from Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) to very recent contributions such as Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion* (2013) and Michael Bergunder’s “What is Religion?” (2011/2014). Next to a long series of monographs addressing the theoretical and historical dimensions of the problem, I went through all the issues of the main academic peer-reviewed journals, although just a selection of these titles has finally made it into my bibliography. In reading through all these materials, what surprised me most was that none of the participants in this debate seemed to ask the question that — as I will argue — should be the starting point of the entire inquiry. If we try to conceptualize or define “religion,” then *what kind of entity* are we talking about, and *where is such an entity located*?

Currently, the most popular answer to this question is that “religion” is a “discursive formation” and therefore exists in modern discourse. I do not deny that one can fruitfully approach the topic from that direction, and to some extent I will be doing so myself in later parts of this article. However, it does not catch the actual nature of the *definiendum* with a sufficient degree of precision. On a more fundamental level, I argue, “religion” must be understood as an *imaginative formation*. This means, quite simply, that it is located nowhere else than in the human imagination, both collective and individual (cf. Schilbrack 2014: 88, 103). Please note that such a claim does not reflect any romanticizing or religionist concern with exalting “the splendors of the religious imagination” or its supposed spiritual benefits: that is not where this argument is coming from. On the contrary, the claim is grounded in the classic Enlightenment tradition of empirical and critical philosophy from Thomas Hobbes and David Hume to Immanuel Kant, which established the imagination as a faculty of the mind that is crucial to all our cognitive processes in that it allows us to

apprehend reality and bring order to the chaos of sense impressions.² As far as I can tell, this basic line of argument has never been refuted — on the contrary, it has created solid philosophical foundations for more recent approaches in cognitive science that highlight imaginative processes as basic to human cognition on a pre-rational and pre-discursive level. As programmatically stated by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in their groundbreaking work on cognitive blending, "[t]he next step in the study of mind is the scientific study of the nature and mechanisms of the imagination" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 8, 15).

Approaching "religion" as an imaginative formation may nevertheless seem strange, and perhaps feel uncomfortable, to readers less familiar with the empiricist and critical analysis of the imagination in classic Enlightenment philosophy. But it is essential to the argument I am about to develop, so I kindly invite those readers to bracket their doubts or objections for the time being and first follow my line of reasoning to the end. I make so bold as to state categorically that unless we grasp the nature of "religion" as an imaginative formation and understand the intellectual implications of taking such an approach, we will remain blind to what is at stake in the enterprise of defining "religion" and will surely lose our way in the extremely confusing labyrinth of current theories and academic polemics. Since the nature of "religion" as an imaginative formation will serve as my Ariadne's thread through that labyrinth, let me make clear what it is *not* intended to mean.

First, and at the risk of belaboring the obvious: that "religion" exists exclusively in the realm of the human imagination (both collective and individual) does not logically follow, and is not meant to suggest directly or indirectly, that any specific convictions conventionally classed as "religious" are mere imaginary delusions. My concern is with the status of "religion" as a mental concept, not with questions such as the existence or non-existence of gods, angels, demons, or any other possible objects of religious belief. As is well known,

2 Warnock 1976: 13–71; cf. Warnock 1994: 1–16. Specifically about the imagination in Kant, see Böhme and Böhme 1983: 231–250; Gibbons 1994; and the particularly impressive analysis in Kneller 2007. For a historically more detailed while philosophically less precise overview of Enlightenment understandings of imagination, see Engell 1981; for a comprehensive discussion, see Brann 1991. The current neglect of the imagination as a key term in the study of religion is emphasized in Traut and Wilke 2015 and Hanegraaff 2016. To forestall some questions and potential misunderstandings about my argument on the following pages (e.g., concerning my understandings of such terms as "ideas" or "concepts;" my assumptions about mental processes such as perception, projection, or reification; my dismissal of real definitions; as well as my understanding of methodological agnosticism), it may be useful to point out that my philosophical and methodological commitments are essentially Kantian (cf. Hanegraaff 2013a: 254).

many early debates on defining religion have been defective for the simple reason that they failed to distinguish sharply and consistently between “religion” as a concept and the supposed reality *sui generis* (“God” or “the Sacred”) to which some scholars believed it should refer (McCutcheon 1997). Debates about the truth or falsity of such claims as the existence of the Sacred or the activity of God in the world are inherently theological in nature. As such they have no place in the study of religion as a scholarly discipline — except, of course, as objects of analysis.

Second, the statement that “religion” exists only in the human imagination in no way conflicts with the fact that, in the real world “out there,” many people engage in such activities as worshipping deities, fighting against unbelievers, going on pilgrimages to holy sites, reporting visions or revelations, and so on and so forth. Obviously, we are not just imagining they are doing such things. The point at issue is a different one. While the real existence of these activities is undeniable, there is nothing self-evident or inevitable about the mental act of categorizing them under one single umbrella named “religion.” It just so happens that, in Western culture (and decisively since early modernity), we have come to perceive a certain range of activities and associated beliefs as pertaining to what we call “religion,” and to most people this particular category has become so natural that it is rarely ever questioned. The mental process involved, through which “something belonging only in the world of imagination is mistaken for something that exists in the real world” (as nicely formulated by Asad 2001: 209; cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966: 106–109), is technically known as *reification*. As will be seen, its importance can hardly be overstated.

Third (and most controversially in the current academic climate), that “religion” exists only in the human imagination does not imply that it has little or no reality. Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous one-liner “*there is no data for religion*” appeared in a book with the significant title *Imagining Religion* and was directed precisely against the reification fallacy (1982: xi). But in subsequent discussions since the 1990s, the undeniable fact that “religion” is a mental construct or rhetorical invention that we project upon the world has been taken a step further and interpreted as an argument for denying its very reality. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, we are told, religion simply does not exist (e.g., Fitzgerald 2000: x; 2007: 7; Boyer 2010: 9). There is no such thing! Such statements sound challenging and exciting until one realizes that *it is precisely by means of reification that imaginary constructs become real and potent forces in the actual world*. There is no such thing as “the economy” out there, but this reified abstraction dominates our newspapers and our everyday lives. There is no such thing as “Islam” out there (only groups and people who consider themselves Muslims of one persuasion or another), but its presence in our collective

imagination has a global impact on political decision-making and dramatically affects the lives of millions. Likewise, of course, there is no such thing as "religion" out there either — only a wide variety of human practices, beliefs, or experiences that may or may not be categorized as such, depending on one's definition. However, by virtue of being *imagined* not only as the "other" of science and rationality but also as the ultimate refuge and safeguard of morality and meaning, "religion" has become constitutive of modernity itself (e.g., Nongbri 2013: 12). To this I will return below.

Let me finish this section with an example. If a militant atheist such as Daniel Dennett (2007) tries to "break the spell" of religion in the interest of reason and scientific progress, what he really wants to break is the power of religious narratives in our collective imagination. To do so effectively, he needs to reify "religion" or accept its reification in popular discourse: otherwise, he would be left without a target or without an audience (most likely both). Would it then be correct to say that since "there is really no such thing as religion out there," Dennett is wasting his time fighting a chimera? Not as long as his books are bought, read, reviewed, and discussed — in short, as long as they manage to find their place within and contribute to, a broader social discourse about "religion," its sense or nonsense, its virtues or dangers, and so on. Not as long as there are enough people around who recognize themselves or others in his depiction of what "religion" is all about. The question of whether there is any truth to Dennett's concept of "religion" is entirely beside the point — in fact, the question is meaningless. Religion is whatever people think religion is. If they believe it exists, then it does indeed exist in their imagination; and reification does the rest, by turning religion into a reality.

Types of Definition

From what we have seen so far, it follows that the goal of defining religion cannot consist in establishing the truth about "what religion really is." Definitions of that kind are usually referred to as *real definitions* and have the propositional form "religion = x" (Robinson 1954: 149–192).³ Their intuitive plausibility results from the trick that reification plays on all of us in making us believe that the imaginary constructs that we project upon the world are actually present "out there," ready for us to investigate them so as to find out what they are. In any such investigation, we are influenced, furthermore, by another cognitive proclivity known as *psychological essentialism* (Medin and Ortony 1989: 183–187):

3 For a courageous but, in my firm opinion, ultimately unconvincing recent defense of real definitions of religion, see Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014. For a general introduction to definition and classification theory in the study of religion, see Snoek 1994.

when we think of religion, it is natural for the human mind to assume that there is some unique hidden property by virtue of which “it” is religion and not something else. Hence, we fall prey to a double deception. First, we experience our imaginal constructs as realities “out there,” and then we make the further assumption that those objects of investigation must have some unique and unchanging essence that exists independently of ourselves and our interpretations. The former process results in real definitions; the latter turns them into essentialist ones.

The theoretical alternative to a real/essentialist definition is known as a *nominal* definition. Nominal definitions do not say “religion = x” but, rather, “by the word ‘religion’ I mean x.” This difference may be clear and straightforward in theory; however, such is the power of our cognitive habits of reification and essentialization that even with purely nominal approaches, conceptual slippage back into realist or semi-realist language is very difficult to avoid in practice. In fact, simply dropping the quotation marks around the substantive “religion” or the adjective “religious” or dispensing with tiresome rejoinders such as “so-called” or “what is conventionally referred to as” may already be enough to arouse dire suspicions of covert realist agendas! Because the study of religion looks back on a long and difficult history of liberation and emancipation from the dominance of Christian theology and quasi-theological *sui generis* discourses (McCutcheon 1997; Hanegraaff 2012), scholars of religion tend to experience this as a much more pressing and sensitive issue than their colleagues in other disciplines of the humanities, who tend to be more relaxed about their own reified concepts. Talk about “art” or “literature” existing out there may be just as questionable as talk about “religion” existing out there, but it does not make us feel that our fundamental understanding of reality is at stake. This is different in the study of religion, because the very world-views and assumptions that are basic to modernity have emerged together with the construction of “religion” as its rhetorical other. As a result, whenever we speak about “religion,” our own identity is at stake and we feel a need to “take a position.”

Next to the basic polarity of real versus nominal, I need to introduce two further types of definition, known as “lexical” and “stipulative” (Robinson 1954: 35–92). *Lexical* definitions are of the familiar dictionary type: they do not claim to explain what “religion” really is but simply describe how the word is commonly used. Their propositional form is “‘religion’ is commonly held to mean x.” Please note that lexical definitions are not subsumed under nominal definitions but must be seen as an independent alternative to real definitions. In other words, they represent a third option: if a real definition says “religion = x,” and a nominal definition says “by the word ‘religion’ I mean x,” then what

a lexical definition really says is "by the word 'religion' *they* mean(t) x." Finally, *stipulative* as opposed to lexical definitions do not just describe or restate the common usage of the term but seek to introduce a better way of defining "religion." Their propositional form is "religion should be understood as x." Technically, this makes them into a form of nominal definition, but stipulative definitions are typically more assertive and ambitious: those who propose them are not content just to specify or explain what they mean by the term "religion" but, implicitly or explicitly, intend to criticize or reject competing definitions.

To further clarify the respective status of these four types as instruments in scholarly research, I will put them in the following order:

Real	Religion = x
Lexical	By the word "religion" they mean(t) x
Nominal	By the word "religion" I mean x
Stipulative	"Religion" should be understood as x

Since real definitions are based on giving credence to a cognitive delusion, as we have seen, they can be dismissed as incompatible with scholarly method. Lexical definitions are compatible with it, but their function is pre-analytic: they usefully tell us how the term "religion" has been used but are content to remain on the descriptive level and do not take a position. As soon as we do assume a position, or a critical perspective as scholars, we have moved from lexical to nominal definitions. Nominal definitions fulfill the elementary scholarly requirement of specifying one's usage of terms. However, only stipulative definitions are scientific in the strong sense of the word because of their additional ambition of helping us understand, as accurately as possible, what it actually *is* that we are looking at or talking about.

Step 2: The Dilemma

I have been arguing that "religion" exists, in the world out there, not as empirical data but as a reified imaginative formation. Hence, we cannot check the validity of our definitions by comparing them to the data or assume that those definitions are extrapolated from empirical facts: the facts and data that we encounter on the ground do not ever consist of "religion" but only of people doing this-or-that and making such-and-such claims (including, perhaps, the claim that their beliefs and activities qualify — or, for that matter, do not qualify — as "religion"). However, this does not mean that "religion" is just an

illusionary trick of the imagination that we are at liberty to discard, ignore, or replace by something of our preference. Having stated that there is no data for religion, in the famous passage referred to above, Jonathan Z. Smith went just one step too far in that direction by adding that “[r]eligion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (1982: xi). That statement was clearly incorrect, as Smith himself would demonstrate in his later work (1998). Historically, the concept of “religion” was *not* created by scholars but emerged over the course of several centuries at least, since the early modern period, as a discursive formation proper to Christian culture and to the complex process of transformation that gave birth to modern and secular worldviews. As such, it has become a discursive reality outside and independent of the scholar’s study: it is not just a term imposed by us on “the data,” but a reality that is there for scholars to analyze.

In their attempts at coming to grips with this mysterious object of research, however, scholars are faced with a dilemma that admits of no easy solution. On the one hand [below: option 1], any valid definition of “religion” needs to stay reasonably close to the commonly held meanings of that term, that is to say, to dominant lexical definitions. If it strays too far from them, it will no longer be recognizable as a definition of “religion” (as helpfully pointed out by Jan Snoek [1999: 314], a stipulative definition of “religion” as “fishing at sea” is formally possible but would obviously make no sense). But, on the other hand [below: option 2], those commonly held meanings and lexical definitions are by no means innocent — on the contrary, they are deeply problematic. In demarcating “religion” from whatever it is not, they categorize human culture along heavily loaded ideological fault lines: for instance they set up a contrast of “religion” (= true) against “magic” (= false); “religion” (= false) against “reason” (= true); “religion” (= good) against “superstition” (= bad); “religion” (= bad) against “science” (= good); “religion” (= moral) against “paganism” (= immoral); or even of “religion” (= immoral) against “humanism” (= moral). And so on. This fact makes it hard to avoid concluding that, in the interest of scholarly objectivity, our definitions should *not* stay close to commonly held meanings or lexical definitions at all! On the contrary, should they not try to move away from them as far as possible, or even be discarded altogether?

While both arguments are compelling, they seem mutually exclusive. Moreover, the logic of option 1 seems tautological (“a valid definition of ‘religion’ must define ‘religion’”) while that of option 2 seems paradoxical (“a valid definition of ‘religion’ must *not* define ‘religion’”).⁴ So here we have our basic

4 For an independent but very similar argument, see Bergunder 2011 and the updated English version from 2014, especially 252–256. Bergunder’s “Religion 1” refers to stipulative scholarly definitions and “Religion 2” to common understandings as captured in lexical definitions.

dilemma: stipulative definitions cannot live with lexical ones but cannot live without them either! Let us look more closely now at how these two types of logic have worked out in practice.

Option 1: Co-opting "Religion"

Definitions that follow the former kind of logic have an obvious advantage: they make intuitive sense to most people, at least in a Western context, because they are reminiscent of what we have already learned to understand by the term "religion." For instance, Edward B. Tylor's famous "minimum definition" of religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" (1913: 424) makes sense to many people who (1) are used to having God described to them as a spiritual being, (2) therefore assume that other cultures must have similar deities, and (3) have come to take it for granted that "belief" (rather than ritual practice, for instance, or personal experience) is what "religion" is ultimately all about. This is the background to what Melford E. Spiro, in an influential article that proposed a definition similar to Tylor's, called "intra-cultural intuitivity" (1966: 91). In giving our assent to such definitions, what we are actually doing is highlighting Christianity, and Protestantism more specifically, as particularly good examples of the class or category that we want to refer to as "religion." In other words, we allow them to function as our *prototypes* for imagining "religion" (Lakoff 1987; Saler 2000: 197–226). Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, this logic is found not just in so-called "substantive" definitions such as Tylor's or Spiro's (which concentrate on beliefs considered typical for "religion") but is at least as pervasive in "functionalist" contexts (which are more interested in the social function of "religion"). For instance, Emile Durkheim's definition in his famous *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* relies entirely on Christian prototypes or even stereotypes (Hanegraaff 1999: 341–345).

Many scholars accept or even embrace the ethnocentricity of such approaches as unavoidable and unproblematic. They argue that "religion" just happens to be a Western concept grounded in monotheistic prototypes, and we should just accept the fact. For instance, in his influential monograph *Conceptualizing Religion*, Benson Saler advocates in no uncertain terms "that we acknowledge explicitly that for most Western scholars the clearest examples of the category religion, the most prototypical examples of it, are those families of religions that we call 'Judaism,' 'Christianity,' and 'Islam'" (Saler 2000: xii). Saler's conceptualization of "religion" might therefore

What seems initially tautological and paradoxical can then be translated into logical although mutually exclusive statements: "religion 1 must define religion 2" and "religion 1 must not define religion 2."

be described as *monotheism-plus*: it comprises Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, plus

whatever else we deem to participate in the pool of elements to the extent of resembling the Western monotheisms in significant respects. And how do we establish what is significant? By cogent analytical arguments about the elements that we deem analogous to those that we associate with our reference religions, the Western monotheisms (2000: 225).

Whether it is Saler's intention or not, this clearly amounts to a blanket recipe for "comparative religion" as crypto-theology. The varieties of "religion" are not compared to one another on a basis of equality so as to study their similarities and differences, whatever those might be. Instead, Western monotheism is set up as the normative standard to which everything else is compared so as to determine whether something qualifies as "religion" or not. The fact that Western monotheism, and Christianity in particular, are thereby turned into the measure of all things in matters of "religion" does not seem of any great concern to Saler.

Option 2: Deconstructing "Religion"

For scholars who follow the second type of logic outlined above (i.e., that stipulative definitions should *not* stay close to common lexical meanings of "religion"), the core problem of defining "religion" lies precisely in this dominance of Christian and monotheist prototypes over our collective imagination, which causes us to find them "intuitively" acceptable. Following a hermeneutics of suspicion, they argue that our common lexical notions must not be taken for granted but must be deconstructed so as to uncover what is *really* going on: ultimately, "religion" can and should be reduced to more fundamental social, political, anthropological, discursive, or psychological processes. Emerging from the struggle against *sui generis* approaches since the 1980s and greatly enhanced by postcolonial theory, the currently dominant form of this argument is grounded in a consistent rejection of real definitions. Contrary to the religionist/realist model of "essence and manifestation" (Hanegraaff 2012: 149–150, 295–314), which assumes that "religion = x" and this x keeps making its appearance in specific historical circumstances, it points out that this or that person in this or that historical context merely comes to think that "religion" means x, whereas another person in another historical context thinks it means y or z.

This simple nominalist principle makes it not just possible, but intellectually necessary, to historicize "religion" as a concept: after all, what matters is not what "religion" really means but what it has been *taken* to mean. Because

the term has been used in many different ways in different periods by different people, and its understanding has always depended crucially on intellectual or cultural context, it has gone through both subtle and more radical shifts of meaning from century to century. Investigations of these lexical meanings have taken the shape of detailed historical investigations of what “religion” has been taken to mean since its emergence in Roman antiquity — as the Latin *religio* — and up to the present day (e.g., Smith 1962: 15–50; Despland 1979; Feil 1986, 1997, 2001; Harrison 1990; Bianchi 1994; Smith 1998; Platvoet 1999b: 466–487; Fitzgerald 2007; Nongbri 2013). Even if our current ways of understanding “religion” might have some fascinating precedents in Roman antiquity, as forcefully argued by Giovanni Casadio (2010; cf. Platvoet 1999b: 466–470), the emerging consensus is that they are basically products of early modern Western intellectual culture. There appear to have been three key factors in this regard: (1) the universalizing tendencies of Renaissance Platonism since the fifteenth century (promoting the novel idea of “one religion in the multiplicity of rites” [Cusanus, in Harrison 1990: 12]); (2) Protestant polemics against Roman Catholicism as crypto-paganism since the sixteenth century; and (3) Deist debates about a “natural religion” of humankind, as distinct from the “revealed religion” of Christianity, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Most important of all, our understandings of “religion” emerged, during this period, in response to a *crisis of comparison* caused by the increasingly overwhelming evidence for diversity in human belief and modes of worship. Christianity in Europe was disintegrating into a confusing landscape of warring confessions and sects, all of them claiming to represent the true faith; while simultaneously, previously unknown peoples with strange customs kept being discovered in many other parts of the world. What to make of them? How and where did they fit? The human mind will try to answer such questions by comparing new and unfamiliar data with well-known and familiar prototypes, and, as a result, the beliefs and practices of colonized peoples were routinely compared to those of the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims, the ancient Egyptians, and so on (see, e.g., Chidester 1996 for Southern Africa; Bernand and Gruzinski 1988 for Mexico and Peru). Now any act of comparison — that is, of “negotiating *sameness* and *difference* in a set of observations” (Kripal 2014: 4) — requires a *tertium comparationis* in regard to which the two are being compared: without it, no comparison is possible (Krzyszowski 1981: 301; Weber 2014). In Europe since the early modern period, a *tertium comparationis* was needed to enable comparison of the familiar with the new in matters of belief and worship. I will be arguing that “religion” came to fulfill that function.

The key importance of this point will fully emerge towards the end of this article but should already be emphasized here. What it means is that “religion” was much more than just a Christian theological concept arbitrarily imposed on the rest of the world. Additionally, and more crucially, *it was a necessary technical requirement of the comparative enterprise*. What makes it problematic is not so much that enterprise as such but the very logic of prototype thinking, which proceeds by comparing the new and unknown to what is already familiar and thereby ends up privileging the latter as the norm for everything else. This prototype logic caused “religion” to emerge and get consolidated as a deeply ethnocentric concept grounded in monotheist, more specifically Christian, and even more specifically Protestant assumptions and ideologies. The difference between scholars such as Saler and their radical deconstructionist counterparts is that the former are willing to accept such ethnocentricity as unavoidable in the study of “religion,” while the latter are not. The former are saying, “If that is what ‘religion’ really means, well . . . then that just happens to be what it means, doesn’t it?” The latter are saying, “If that is what ‘religion’ really means, then clearly we cannot continue using it for scholarly purposes!” (e.g., Smith 1962; King 1999; Fitzgerald 2000, 2007; Dubuisson 2003; Nongbri 2013).

It is here that the debate reaches an impasse, with two irreconcilable positions that each refuse to accept the other one’s premises. To start it moving forward again, we must see that both parties share one crucial assumption. Implicitly or explicitly, they agree *that dominant lexical definitions carry normative authority for the creation of stipulative ones*. If this assumption is correct, it follows that in using the term “religion,” we will never be able to escape from its monotheist, more specifically Christian, even more specifically Protestant connotations (e.g., Nongbri 2013: 18). Specific for the deconstructionist argument is its insistence that this fact renders “religion” hopelessly invalid as a scholarly concept, for reasons that are partly historical, partly logical, and partly normative and political. The historical argument is that “religion,” as a relatively recent and specifically European construct or invention, cannot claim universal validity across time and space. The logical argument is that scholarly terminology must be objective; however, the term “religion” fails to pass that test; ergo it is not a scholarly concept. The moral and political argument is that, given its ideological nature, endorsing the term “religion” makes us complicit in an argumentative logic that is designed to legitimate Western imperialism and its systematic subjugation of other cultures. It is clear that on these foundations, the very enterprise of defining “religion” is deeply misguided. We should not define it but deconstruct it.

Option 3: Redescribing "Religion"

Let me repeat that *both* alternatives share the assumption that, in using the term "religion" today, we cannot escape from its monotheist, more specifically Christian, and even more specifically Protestant prototypes. Some scholars (the co-opters) accept this inherent ethnocentricity as inevitable, while for others (the deconstructionists) it means we must dump the concept altogether. Scholars of the latter persuasion often point out that ancient and non-European languages do not even have a word for what we call "religion" (e.g., Nongbri 2013) and argue that the very act of applying that term as an *etic* category therefore does violence to the specific *emic* vocabulary of cultures further removed from the modern West in time and space (Jardine 2004; cf. Hanegraaff 2012: 157–158). For instance, Timothy Fitzgerald follows this line of argumentation when he argues that "only the Pueblo people themselves can decide which English-language categories most truthfully represent their values and practices" (2007: 92; cf. Schilbrack 2012: 101–103). In other words, what gives *us* the right to tell *them* anything about their own values and practices? The intended message is clear: after centuries of colonial domination backed up by ethnocentric theorizing about "religion," Western scholarship should learn to shut its big mouth and start listening!

But there is a *non sequitur* here. The argument assumes that the study of "religion" is incapable of learning from its mistakes or correcting its weaknesses. It assumes that scholars will never improve. Implicitly, the discipline is depicted as a helpless victim of its own cultural or discursive past and hence an inevitable accomplice of imperialism. The argument assumes that scholars are incapable of critical self-reflection regarding the ideological baggage of their basic vocabulary and cannot improve their definitions or their ways of working with them. It almost looks as though some irresistible force is attributed to "religion" that will magically suck the minds of scholars back into Christian or colonialist stereotyping regardless of their best intentions, while making them incurably deaf and blind to the true voices of "others."

Now if we look more closely at that magical force, we easily discover what it is: nothing but the force of prototype thinking! However, while its power in human cognition is certainly very strong, we are not entirely at its mercy, because the specific prototypes of "religion" that are operative in our discipline may have a long history but are not written in stone. Intellectual and scholarly discourse has the capacity of changing and improving by learning from past mistakes — it is capable of making progress. Provided we succeed in isolating the true core of the problem with which we are struggling, we should have no reason to despair of our ability to resolve it. In the next section of this article,

I will be arguing that this core of the problem lies in a serious and almost universal “blind spot” that invalidates the very foundations on which the current debate is built. Once we have located it and have learned to see what we have been overlooking, we should be able to *redescribe* “religion” in such a manner that its monotheist/Christian/Protestant connotations are avoided. As will be argued in the final section, we can do so by restoring it to its original and basic function, that of a *tertium comparationis* enabling historical and cross-cultural comparison.⁵

Step 3: The Blind Spot in the Debate

All participants in the debate seem to take for granted that the domain of “religion” stands against that of “the secular.” For good reasons, those two are seen as inextricably bound together: neither “religion” nor “the secular” is capable of defining and maintaining its own identity otherwise than by means of contrast with its negative counterpart. This is why deconstructionists like to speak provocatively of a “simultaneous birth of religion and secularism” (Nongbri 2013: 4).

However, the basic assumption is incorrect. The historical record shows conclusively that “religion” was *not* defined against “the secular” alone, or the reverse. What actually happened during the early modern period is that “religion” and “the secular” were defining their identities on two fronts simultaneously: not just against each other, but also against a whole range of traditional non-secular beliefs and practices that were just as distasteful to Christian orthodox thinkers as they were to their secular critics. This third domain that they both rejected has been referred to by different names, but the most well-known are *superstition* and *magic* (Hanegraaff 2012, esp. 156–177). Contrary to the received wisdom taken for granted in current debates about the concept of “religion,” then, we are *not* dealing with a simple opposition of religion versus the secular: instead, we are dealing with a triad. This means that those famous prototypes of “religion” that have claimed so much attention and caused so much trouble in the definition debate are *not* adequately described as stand-ins for “monotheism, more specifically Christianity, more specifically Protestantism.” They stand for those three imagined *minus* their so-called “superstitious” or “magical” dimension.

5 My terminology of “description versus redescription” is based upon a suggestion by Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: 36–37) that has been taken up by later scholars as an upgrade of the older terminology of *etic* versus *emic* (1982: 36–37; McCutcheon 2001: xiv–xv; Nongbri 2013: 21–22).

This simple fact (for that is really what it is) should have far-reaching implications for the entire current debate on conceptualizing and defining "religion." How completely it has been overlooked by almost all participants in that debate can easily be checked by just going through the indices and tables of contents of their major publications, where relevant terms such as "magic," "paganism," "superstition," or "idolatry" turn out to be virtually absent. Again, this phenomenon can be explained by the remarkable power of reification as a semi-automatic mental process. As scholars, we know that defining "magic" is a topic every bit as complicated as that of defining "religion" — but we usually assume that it is a separate debate. Why do we make that assumption? Because, without ever realizing it, we have *already* reified "magic" as something different from "religion"! Hence, we find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle of our own making, attempting to define something that we have already defined in terms that distinguish it from something else (Hanegraaff 2012: 167–168). This circle exists nowhere but in our imagination. How did we get trapped in it? That question cannot be answered on the level of theory but only by revisiting the historical origins and development of the relevant terms.

Historicizing the Blind Spot

The terms "superstition" and "magic" both began their career as neutral or positive terms. *Superstitio* is Latin for the Greek *deisidaimonia*, in which *deisi* could mean "fear" but also "awe" or "respect," while *daimones* could be gods, goddesses, semi-divinities, or any other kind of superhuman being, regardless of their good or evil intentions (Hanegraaff 2012: 159; cf. Martin 2004). Hence, we have, potentially at least, the complete spectrum ranging from what we might now perceive as a "superstitious" fear of demons to a "religious" respect for divinity or a "god-fearing" attitude: for instance, when the apostle Paul addressed the Athenians as *deisidaimones* (Acts 17.22), this was still meant as an expression of respect, not as an accusation. As for *mageia*, it derives from the Old Persian *magu-*, which seems to have referred to a sacrificial priest or a similar functionary. Having been imported into Greek no later than the sixth century BCE, a positive understanding of *mageia* as "worship of the gods" (Plato *Alcibiades* 1.122A) survived at least as late as Apuleius in the second century CE and was revived during the Renaissance (De Jong 1997: 387–394; Otto 2011: 143–272).

Parallel to their positive or neutral usage, both terms acquired negative connotations as well. Since the fourth century BCE, the Greek philosophical elite began to use *deisidaimonia* as a term of disdain for popular and irrational beliefs about harmful deities, and for cultic practices that reflected a misguided fear of the gods. As for the Latin *superstitio*, it originally referred to practices such as soothsaying, divination, or prophecy, which were perfectly acceptable

in the Roman Empire. However, from the first century CE on, the term became associated with the “depraved, strange, spooky and dishonorable” practices of foreign peoples such as the Egyptians, the Druids, or the Chaldeans (Martin 2004: 132–133). In short, it was associated with threatening “others” whose presence might pose a danger to social and political stability. Something similar happened to *mageia*. Already by the fifth century BCE it began to acquire negative connotations reminiscent of the term *goes*, whence the term *goeteia* (De Jong 1997: 388; Otto 2011: 156). In the Roman Empire, the term *magia* came to refer to the suspicious rituals and practices of private practitioners unsanctioned by the state-sponsored cult.

For our concerns, it is essential to see that the conceptual boundaries between *superstitio* and *religio* (and their Greek equivalents, *deisidaimonia* and *threskeia*) were so fluid that the phenomena to which they were meant to refer simply cannot be kept apart except in terms of normative valuation. In other words, they referred to the *same* domain of beliefs and practices. *Religio* meant an attitude of “scruple” or “reverence,” based upon feelings of awe, anxiety, doubt, or fear “aroused in the mind by something that cannot be explained” (e.g., Casadio 2010: 305–308, with quotation from W. Warde Fowler). Likewise, *deisidaimonia* referred to attitudes of “awe” or “respect” towards the presence of gods; and as demonstrated by Dieter Harmening (1979: 16–17), its Latin equivalent *superstitio* was understood in a perfectly equivalent positive sense by authors such as Seneca, Junianus Justinus, Vergilius, or Cicero — not to mention the apostle Paul, as mentioned above.

After the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century, the two terms drifted apart according to a simple logic of normative disjunction: pious worship of the true Christian God versus idolatrous worship directed to the false gods of the pagans. In this process, *superstitio* and *magia* came to be imagined as broadly equivalent terms, with “idolatry” as their common denominator (Harmening 1979; Hanegraaff 2012: 169–177). The long and extremely involved history of these terms and concepts need not be summarized here even in its barest outlines (see references in Hanegraaff 2012: 158 n. 13, 169 n. 65): the essential point for us to notice is their enormous impact on scholarly theorizing about “religion.” For this we need to move on to the birth of “comparative religion” in the colonialist era.

The Vanishing Trick: How “False Religion” Becomes “No Religion”

The strange practices and beliefs that Western explorers or missionaries encountered far from home could be interpreted by them in two different ways: either as a depraved travesty of what “true” religion was all about (because it fell short of Christian or monotheist models), or as wholly undeserving of the

label "religion" (on the assumption that only *true* religion deserves that label). In other words, they could either be presented as marginal forms of "religion" proper or could be excluded from that category altogether.

This distinction is important but has not always been applied with sufficient clarity and precision. To demonstrate this point, I will discuss the example of David Chidester's critically acclaimed monograph *Savage Systems* (1996). One of its most central claims is that, according to the standard pattern of "frontier comparative religion" in situations of colonial conquest, indigenous people were originally perceived as having *no religion*. Chidester's thesis has been broadly accepted, but if we look closely at his evidence, we discover that "absence of religion" could mean two very different things. Sometimes it meant quite literally that "idols, temples, religious worship or ceremonies were unknown to [indigenous peoples], and they neither believed in the true and only God, nor adored false deities" (1996: 11); but in the overwhelming majority of cases, it meant that they had "no religion, 'only superstitions . . .'" (1996: 12, cf. 15, 60, 65, 76–78, 85, 98, 178–180, 182, 234–235).

Instead of being conflated, these two meanings should be sharply distinguished, for they make all the difference. For instance, Chidester claims that in the eighteenth century, "*fetishism* emerged as a new term for the absence of religion . . . Without religion, Africans were unable to evaluate objects . . . [T]his alleged inability to assess the value of material objects became the defining feature of African ignorance, childishness, capriciousness, and lack of any organized religion" (1996: 15). Note that several unexamined assumptions have now tacitly slipped in: apparently "no religion" means no *organized* religion, and the claim that fetishism is not religion means that it is not considered *true* religion. These are transparent examples of the monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant prototype at work: that of religion *minus* its so-called "superstitious," "magical," "pagan," or "idolatrous" dimension (not properly organized like a church, not "truly" religious). Chidester claims that colonial comparativism initially saw indigenous cultures as marked by an "absence of religion," but his evidence shows otherwise: they usually saw such cultures as marked by "superstitious" practices and beliefs such as magic or pagan idolatry. That colonialists did not *emically* see such practices and beliefs as "religion" does not mean that as scholars we should agree with them by tacitly adopting their prejudice in our *etic* language.

As the new model of "world religions" emerged during the nineteenth century (Masuzawa 2005), henceforth it comprised only those recently reified cultural complexes ("Hinduism," "Buddhism," "Taoism," etc.) that could be presented as sufficiently close to monotheistic models to escape the taint of association with the "third category" of magic, superstition, paganism, idolatry,

and so on. As a result, that category was marginalized even more thoroughly and systematically than before: its relevance to “religion” could not be wholly ignored, but it could not be seriously included in that category, either. On a global scale, the vague and ill-defined domain of “everything other than the world religions” came to be associated with non-scriptural, indigenous, or tribal cultures; with dubious “folk” practices next to the supposedly more “sophisticated” practices of the cultural elites; or with “occult” or “esoteric” currents in the margins of dominant religions in Western culture.⁶

While the current debate on definition and conceptualization is based on the dualistic assumption that “religion” must be defined against “the secular,” this dualism therefore masks a triadic structure. Because this fact goes unrecognized, what usually happens is that the third term is tacitly removed from the equation instead of being included under the umbrella of “religion.”⁷ The deep irony is that by thus treating the third term as largely irrelevant to the concept of “religion,” thereby rendering it invisible, even contemporary deconstructionists end up perpetuating the very same Christian-Protestant ideologies whose legacy they are trying so hard to deconstruct! If the triadic perspective continues to make intuitive sense to us even today, this is because our intellectual culture has inherited the profound disdain for “pagan/idolatrous/magical/superstitious” beliefs and practices that has always been typical of orthodox (and most particularly Protestant) Christians. Secular thinkers who embrace the values of rationality and science have unwittingly adopted the same normativities from their Protestant forebears. In short, as

6 The virtual exclusion of this imaginal domain from what was considered to be “religion” can be observed not just in traditional forms of scholarship; it appears even in recent academic treatments of comparative religion that concentrate precisely on “the extraordinary,” “the uncanny,” “the fantastic,” “the weird,” and “the strange” but still keep marginalizing “indigenous and tribal religions” (see Kripal 2014: xiii).

7 For a closely analogous argument, see Taves 2011: 298–303. Contrary to her, however (and although I share her agenda of what I take to be a radical empiricism: 2011: 291–292), I insist that it is insufficient to just identify “religion” as an “inherently contested” and hence “unstable” Complex Cultural Concept (CCC) that should not be defined but disassembled into basic building blocks (Taves 2010: 186; 2011: 291; 2015). The problem with this approach is that (in Taves’ own terms, but possibly against her deeper intentions) it pre-empts any attempt at reverse engineering “religion” *historically*, so as to find out *how and why* it has come to assume its current meaning(s) and function(s) in popular and academic discourse, including their exclusionary effects. In arguing that we should “quit worrying so much about defining ‘religion’” (2010: 186), she actually puts the cart of conceptual deconstruction before the horse of historical deconstruction, thereby sacrificing the historicity of the term to accommodate a natural science paradigm.

I have argued elsewhere, both Christianity *and* secular modernity define their very identity against this "Other" (Hanegraaff 2012: 3, 369, 373–379).

This deeply normative and ideological separation of "magic" from "religion" cannot be maintained either empirically or historically (Styers 2004; Otto 2011). It is revealing that even the chief modern pioneer in this regard, E. B. Tylor, reached that same conclusion already during his lifetime: while his foundational classic *Primitive Culture* (1871) was built upon the "Magic — Religion — Science" triad and did much to popularize it, Tylor himself deconstructed it just twelve years later, in his entry on "Magic" for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1883) (Hanegraaff 1998: 262–265). But this shift escaped everybody's attention, and the combined cognitive forces of prototype thinking and reification proved much stronger than those of critical analysis and historical evidence. As a result, throughout the twentieth century and forward into the twenty-first, the triad has reigned supreme in scholarly as well as popular assumptions about both "religion" and "magic" and continues to do so up to the present (Otto 2011: 1–4; cf. Hanegraaff 2014: 114). Its effects reach much further than commonly realized. To give just one example, in his extremely influential standard translation of the Greek "magical" (!) papyri, Karl Preisendanz kept arbitrarily adding the prefix "*Zauber-*" and interpreting everything as "magical" by default: for instance, any reference to *praxis* and *pragmateia* (act, acting) was turned into a "magical act (*Zauberhandlung*)," *botanai* (plants) became "magical plants," *charakteras* (signs) became "magical signs," *epaoidais* (songs) became "magical songs," and *onomai* (names) became "magical names" (Otto 2011: 385). This is a particularly clear example of how the power of prototypes can trick scholars into actually *creating* "magic" (in order to keep it apart from "religion") while making them believe that they are *discovering* it in their materials. In this manner, scholars have been creating "magic" all over the world, excepting only those practices that were protected by the "world religions" label. By the same token, of course, they have been preserving, protecting, and reinforcing monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant prototypes of "religion."

A Tale of Three Brothers

Having identified the blind spot in current debates about conceptualizing and defining "religion," how can we proceed forward? Can we escape from the vicious circle of reification that has kept us trapped in monotheist, more specifically Christian, and even more specifically Protestant prototypes? Perhaps we cannot, but then again, perhaps we do not need to. Reification means that concepts that exist only in our imagination are misunderstood as somehow existing in the world "out there." In this sense, they are not real but imaginary,

and the circle that keeps us trapped is ultimately no more than a mental illusion: there is nothing to escape from. However, the power of reification *is* very real indeed; as I argued above, it would be misguided to jump from the imaginary nature of “religion” to the conclusion that it does not exist. It is in this sense that the circle keeps us trapped.

As scholars, we may have to accept the fact that, for the foreseeable future at least, “religion” will keep playing an important role in the collective imagination on a worldwide scale, along with other reified concepts such as “magic,” “superstition,” “paganism,” “the occult,” and so on, all of them dependent on monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant prototypes. All this ideologically loaded language, no matter how ethnocentric or otherwise problematic it may be, just happens to be part of the *emic* discourse that we should study and try to understand.

Initially, one might want to agree with the deconstructionists that this deep ethnocentricity of the term “religion” renders it unsuitable as a general umbrella or second-order *etic* concept. However, I have argued that the historical analyses on which their argument depends are structurally incomplete. Ironically, in assuming that “religion” is the structural counterpart of “the secular,” these analyses remain dependent on (and hence subservient to) the very same ideologies of exclusion that they intend to criticize. I began this section by quoting Nongbri’s statement about the “simultaneous birth of religion and secularism” during the early modern period (2013: 4); but we have now seen that, contrary to common assumptions, those twins were not born alone — rather, we are dealing with triplets! To continue the metaphor, one might say that the two hostile brothers made a tacit pact. They would fight one another as worthy opponents but agreed to ignore their brother as if he had no right to exist. He was below their contempt and deserved no recognition as a legitimate member of the family. This strategy has been so singularly successful that even the most critical and perceptive of modern critics have been taken in: they have been concentrating on the tale of the twins and their lifelong battle (“religion versus the secular”), while ignoring their brother as an illegitimate bastard son at best. His existence could not be wholly ignored, but he should not appear on family pictures or expect to be invited to family parties. He became the invisible brother.

The direction of my argument should now be clear. As scholars, we cannot afford to remain complicit in the twins’ normative strategy of rejecting their third brother and seeking to suppress his existence. He just happens to be part of the family and must receive equal treatment and recognition. How does this change the parameters of our problem?

Step 4: Reconstructing “Religion”

The challenge of conceptualizing and defining “religion” as a valid scholarly (*etic*) category *cannot* be met as long as we assume that this term refers to the monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant prototype that dominates — and will no doubt keep dominating — the way “religion” is perceived in the popular imagination. In this regard, the deconstructionists are correct. The challenge *can* be met, however, if we return to the historical roots of the problem, after having corrected the blind spot that has prevented us from perceiving what really happened at that point of origin. Contrary to the deconstructionist argument, I argue, this allows us to reconstruct “religion” as a crucial part of our technical vocabulary.

I have argued that the concept of “religion” emerged, during the early modern period, in response to a *crisis of comparison* caused by the increasingly overwhelming evidence for global diversity in human belief and modes of worship. A concept was needed to enable comparison of the familiar with the new, and my thesis is that “religion” came to fulfill that function. In other words, the technical status of “religion” was that of a *tertium comparationis* or, more precisely, of a “pre-comparative *tertium*.” As recently explained by Ralph Weber, the third of comparison plays a crucial role

... in the determination of the *comparata* which one then sets out to compare in one or another respect. As a matter of fact, there is already a sort of *tertium comparationis* put to work in that determination, and insofar as the determination precedes the comparison this *tertium* may be thought of as “pre-comparative” . . . In comparative studies, the placing of one *comparatum* next to the other for the sake of subsequent comparison is not done purely at will but on the basis of a presumed or asserted relation, which is expressive of a claim of resemblance or dissemblance (or of identity or difference) and thus is also the result of prior comparison(s): “pre-comparative” is in this sense always “post-comparative.” However, that really means that the determination of the *comparata* at least upon reflection involves the positing or asserting of a point of commonality. (Weber 2014: 162)

To prevent misunderstandings, an analogy might be useful here. The very act of comparing apples and bananas requires a pre-comparative *tertium*, which, in this case, would be “fruit.” Now imagine that we have been comparing apples and bananas for a while and want to add some new items of comparison: for

instance, oranges and pears. Even prior to making any comparison (how do their shapes or colors differ? Which one is juicier? Which taste do we prefer?), we find that in the mere act of allowing them to be compared, we have *already* made a comparison, through which we have satisfied ourselves that “these, too, are fruit.”⁸ This pre-comparativity makes “fruit” different from those *tertia comparationis* that are not pre- but only post-comparative, such as “sweetness,” “juiciness,” “yellowness,” and so on. The analogy shows us two things that are relevant to our purposes. First, the pre-comparative *tertium* is not optional but necessary: no comparison is possible without a *tertium*, and no *tertium* is possible without comparison. Second, while it is possible to define the *tertium*, it is not necessary to do so: the category “fruit” is operative already prior to any definition and remains operative even in the absence of it.

Moving back now to the early modern period: as a pre-comparative *tertium* in this sense, the concept of “religion” was doing real and important work. Its function consisted in mediating between two *comparata* in the collective imagination: (1) anything associated with the “monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant” prototypes of belief and modes of worship, and (2) anything associated with its traditional “Other” referred to by such labels as paganism, superstition, magic, idolatry, or occult philosophy (cf. Hanegraaff 2013b). Of course, this basic opposition itself was deeply ideological. It goes back at least as far as the struggle of early Christianity with Hellenistic culture, codified in such classic manifestos as Augustine’s *City of God against the Pagans* and relying ultimately on the Old Testament rejection of idolatry (Halbertal and Margalit 1992). It was crucial not only to the Protestant battle against the “pagan idolatry” of Roman Catholicism, but also to the Enlightenment assault on “superstition and magic” (Hanegraaff 2012). However, what is so interesting about “religion” understood as a pre-comparative *tertium* is that, by definition, it is not and cannot be committed to any ideological position. It cannot determine or predetermine the outcome of the comparison: all it does is enable the two alternatives to be compared in the first place. Actual comparisons may turn out to be heavily biased indeed, but this cannot affect the principle of comparability as such.

If “religion” is understood as the pre-comparative *tertium* implicit in comparison between the familiar and the new in matters of belief and forms of

8 As Weber points out in the quotation just given, this in no way conflicts with the fact that fruit is also “post-comparative” insofar as it implies a distinction from e.g., vegetables, furniture, and so on. Note that the pre-comparative *tertium* works negatively as well: we do not allow tables or chairs to be compared to our apples and bananas because we realize they are not fruit.

worship, then in our scholarly work we can allow it to *replace* "religion" understood as an ideological concept based upon monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant prototypes. The standard deconstructionist objections then no longer apply. It must be noted that on this basis, our task as scholars is *not* correctly described as "comparing religions," or comparing "forms of religion," or indeed of "studying religion." Rather, the task now consists in comparing x and y in regard to the *tertium comparationis* "religion."

Reconstructing "religion" along these lines has some unavoidable implications. First, "magic" (not to mention "superstition," or any equivalent terms used for the "third domain") must vanish entirely as a second-order *etic* concept in the study of religion. Most of what used to be seen as falling under its umbrella will now fall under the much wider umbrella of "religion."⁹ Second, as "religion" now finds itself without the traditional Other against which it used to define itself, it inevitably loses the implicit prototypical content that caused all the problems in the first place. Our pervasive tendency of claiming the term "religion" for some specific Western prototype while denying it to everything else is thus exposed for what it is; and its historical, social, or discursive effects become available for critical analysis. Third and finally, this reconstructed category of "religion" still stands against "the secular." The difference is simply that the opposition now no longer masks an implicit triad. I maintain that the categories of "religion" and "the secular" are grounded in different and ultimately incompatible assumptions. Our task consists in studying the former from the perspective of the latter.

Epilogue: Defining the *Tertium*?

At first sight, my reconstruction of "religion" as *tertium comparationis* (or, more precisely, pre-comparative *tertium*) might seem like a radical new departure; in fact, however, it merely formalizes an intuition that has been at work in our discipline from the very beginning and is actually constitutive of that discipline. Let me illustrate this with reference to Nongbri, whose entire deconstructionist argument is built on a by now familiar claim, formulated early on in his book:

Because of the pervasive use of the word "religion" in the cultures of the modern Western world... we already intuitively know what "religion"

9 It should be noted, however, that in some specific cases, such as medieval *magia naturalis*, "science" might be a more relevant term of comparison (see Hanegraaff 2012: 169–177).

is before we even try to define it: religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity. (Nongbri 2013: 18)

Nongbri overlooks the fact that a very different intuition has always been at work in our discipline as well. One can see this in the simple fact that those so-called “magical” or “pagan” beliefs and practices that have always been rejected by Protestant Christianity have routinely been studied, in spite of everything, under the wider rubric of . . . religion. After all, studying “magic” and “magical texts” is one of those things that “scholars of religion” have typically been doing. This fact stands in direct conflict with Nongbri’s claim: it shows that in the actual practice of historical research, even beliefs and practices that do *not* sufficiently resemble modern Protestant Christianity are nevertheless perceived by scholars as somehow falling under the rubric of “religion.” This is easily explained, of course, by the function of “religion” as *tertium comparationis*. Hence, my reconstruction of the category simply formalizes a principle that has always been at work in the actual praxis of *Religionswissenschaft*.

Finally, should the *tertium* itself be defined? As noted above, I am not sure that it is necessary (we can study apples, pears, or bananas and compare them to one another without ever having to define what we mean by “fruit”), but I think it can be done. The most important requirement for defining “religion” as *tertium comparationis* is that a position of strict impartiality be preserved in the comparison between “monotheist, more specifically Christian, more specifically Protestant” prototypes and their discursive Other(s). My own proposal in that regard is inspired by Clifford Geertz’s famous definition, and describes religion as “any symbolic system that influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (Hanegraaff 1999).¹⁰ I certainly do not mean to insist that this is the only way to define the *tertium*: if I offer my own definition here, this is only to demonstrate that such a definition is possible in principle. As far as I can see, mine does a perfectly decent job of accomplishing what it should accomplish: creating a platform (*not*, mind

10 The most crucial difference between Geertz’s definition and mine is that although Geertz discusses the dimension of ritual practice at length in the body of his article, it is remarkably absent from his famous definition. My definition therefore re-inserts that dimension. It should also be noted that, for reasons that are explained in my 1999 article, my own definition of “religion” entails a further differentiation between “religions” and “spiritualities” (*not* “spirituality” in the singular). Like Schilbrack (2005), I am not convinced by Asad’s influential critique (1993), which caricatures Geertz as an adherent of *sui generis* religion for reasons that strike me as largely ideological.

you, for "comparing religions," but) for comparing x with y in regard to the *tertium comparationis* "religion." It could even have served in that capacity already during the early modern period, when the *tertium* became necessary to make sense of the strange beliefs and modes of worship observed among indigenous peoples and compare them with more familiar forms of, well, religion. In no way does this definition depend (*pace* Nongbri 2013: 18) upon any monotheist, more specifically Christian, or even more specifically Protestant prototypes, either positively by promoting them or negatively by rejecting or denigrating them. As such, I believe it escapes from the deconstructionist critique, thereby demonstrating the possibility of reconstructing "religion" as a valid field of academic research.

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