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## What Your Lecturer Doesn't Tell You About Religion

Philosophers are usually expected to begin by defining the key terms that they will use, but defining 'religion' is much more problematic than you may think. Dozens of different definitions have been proposed from within different academic disciplines, and none of them has been universally accepted. Recently when Britain needed a definition for the purposes of law, three contenders were put forward:

Durkheim: '[A] unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them';

The *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please a divine ruling power, the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this . . . a particular system of faith worship';

Lord Ahmad: 'a system of beliefs and practices centred around the worship of God which is derived in whole or in part from a book revealed by God to one of his messengers'.

How useful are these definitions for the study of philosophy of religion? One immediate problem is that each of them excludes a 'religion'. Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Daoism and some traditions in Hinduism would not qualify to be 'religions' under Lord Ahmad's definition, because they are among a number of faith traditions that do not include a belief in one or more god(s). In order to fit the requirements of a definition, one must find features that are found in *all* of the systems that we deem to be religions, but do not also include other groups such as political parties or football clubs that also command strong adherence. Belief in a god, or an afterlife, or some activity like ritual sacrifice or prayer, may not be a part of *every* religion on the planet. For the legal definition a further requirement was that the definition must not only

describe the religions that exist, but would in future determine whether emerging movements can be deemed a religion or not. It was not only describing existing groupings, but controlling into the future what religions must be or cannot be.

Since people use the word 'religion' all the time, and seem to know what is meant by it, why is it so hard to give a reliable definition of it? The word itself came into existence in the European languages, and therefore reflects that civilization's views of life. There is no word exactly equivalent to 'religion' in either Sanskrit or Hawaiian. It appears that some cultures don't divide faith in God from faith in one's political leaders, and don't have a word for 'religion' that doesn't include 'politics'. Perhaps in some cultures there isn't an overall term for part of life that includes praying and believing, but excludes eating or having sex; perhaps some do not have a word for 'religion' which excludes other 'good things to do' that Europeans consider non-religious.

*The word 'religion', in European languages, evolved in a particular history and culture.*

*Although the word's precursor was in use even in Cicero's time, a narrative commonly given is that the modern use of the word and concept have their roots in the Enlightenment. Specifically, the origins would lie in the critique of Christianity and of Church power.*

*Understood as a contrast word to Christianity, it sought to create a faith without Christian doctrines; and even in the twentieth century a theologian like Barth can oppose 'Christianity' and 'religion', to the latter's detriment. Understood in opposition to 'the secular', one Enlightenment project was to create, define and police a 'secular' social territory autonomous from the religious authorities, while another was to underwrite the claims of a 'secular' political power as a rival to Church power.*

*So if the construction of a category called 'religion' is an Enlightenment project, it has never been separated from a particular agenda or ideology. Accordingly, the task of defining of the word and describing the category has been contested from the start. One fact sometimes overlooked is that there has never been agreement on the word and what it presupposes: first, that there can be an overarching theologically neutral category which successfully encompasses all the world's faiths; secondly, that the world is divided into two territories, and only in one of them does faith have any authority.*

*So the word 'religion' is not a neutral term, even within American and European Christianity. Not least, its boundaries are disputed any time a question of policy, law or practice that has an ethical dimension arises within the 'secular' realms of science and medicine, or economics and governance. Moreover, the secular-sacred*

*dichotomy within the genealogy of the word 'religion' is not culturally neutral. If this division is still contested within Western society, it is certainly not taken as self-evident in other cultures.<sup>1</sup>*

*At the same time, the European Enlightenment was not the first or the only time a dominant religion encountered other religions; and if we broaden our view beyond the West we can find historical examples of moments where a demographically dominant religion, such as Islam, also had to create a more 'neutral' concept of religion in order to engage with the people and the ideas of other faiths. (See the opening of Chapter 2 for an example.)*

If a word and its use have evolved within one particular culture, then care needs to be taken before it is grafted onto another. Another civilization's beliefs and practices may not fit that model. The word 'religion' can be a dangerous starting point for understanding the faiths of the world. To the Western mind, 'religion' is a neutral term but this view is misleading, for it conceals religious assumptions we make, based on the familiar faiths of the West. When we use it to approach other faiths without considering their own framework, we are likely to try to squeeze them to fit inside our own Procrustean bed. Christians, for example, when they want to understand another religion, tend to look for doctrines they can list to understand that 'religion' by knowing its beliefs. But even with Christianity's ancestral relation, Judaism, this does not necessarily describe well what that faith is like from inside the community. Taoism, like many indigenous religions, may see itself more in ways of life, ritual practices or ethical beliefs than in formal dogmas.

*Procrustes, a dwarf, had a dwarf-sized bed in his guest-room. This caused visitors some discomfort, but when they emerged, complaining, from their room, Procrustes would explain patiently that there was nothing at all the matter with his bed, as he followed them back into the room. When the disgruntled guest climbed into the bed to demonstrate its inadequacy – 'You see, my arm is hanging over the side . . . my feet are dangling off the end of the bed . . .' – Procrustes could demonstrate that this was not the case at all. He produced an axe and removed all the bits of the visitor that did not fit into his bed, to show how they did in fact fit perfectly within it.<sup>2</sup>*

Similarly, Christians often look at religious patterns with a model of a 'core' religion, or mainstream; surrounded perhaps by deviant or 'fringe' spin-offs. The very name 'Hinduism' is a Western imposition of a single religious identity on a diversity of traditions in India. Such an approach also doesn't help to understand the relationships within African, Polynesian and Native American religions.

On the other hand, a Vaishnavite from India can incorporate Christian belief in Jesus into her spiritual outlook quite easily, while a Christian from Alabama is likely to find it very difficult to give the same houseroom to the Vaishnavite's beliefs. Where there are problems of understanding and epistemological acceptance, the difficulties are not always reciprocal and equal.

It endangers our attempts to understand other faiths if we assume in advance that we can tell what they are all about, because we know 'what religion is' and we know that this is a 'religion'.

At other times, when you contemplate another religious culture, the differences can be so striking that you can have the opposite reaction. What you see can look so alien that the possibilities for understanding it seem remote. Instead of bending it into a familiar frame, it sets off a different Euro-American tendency: the preoccupation with 'Self vs. Other'. This opposition has created a legacy of problems for Western philosophy; from the problem of 'other minds' to the suggestion that other cultures are so radically incommensurate that we cannot comprehend them at all. But why 'The Other' should be a philosophical problem at all, least of all an epistemic one, is not self-evident to philosophers in other regions. Nor do all other world views interpret 'difference' as 'division' or 'opposition'. Importing this kind of philosophical xenophobia into the business of understanding religion may prevent us from understanding faith traditions on their own terms, or in any meaningful way at all.

#### **A thought-provoking view:**

*Timothy Fitzgerald questions our use of the word and concept of 'religion'. He suggests that it is not a genuine, cross-cultural category but something that we impose on different cultures. He argues that it arises from theology: 'liberal ecumenical theology', wishing to go beyond the study of Christianity and needing to define its object of study. The term 'religion' is meant to be neutral and apply to all cases, leaving out a faith commitment in the method of study. However, it still imports a host of assumptions that can distort the object of study; chief among them the assumption that 'religion' is about human responses to the divine. It imposes Western assumptions, values and frameworks on other societies; such as assumptions about the relationship between 'religion' and the 'secular', 'religion' and politics, religion and society or economics. Its categories, such as 'God', 'salvation' or 'the meaning of history', are derived from Judaeo-Christian monotheistic traditions. He thinks we should reconceive the field:*

*I propose that religious studies be rethought and rerepresented as cultural studies, understood as the study of the institutions and the*

*institutionalized values of specific societies, and the relation between those institutionalized values and the legitimation of power.<sup>3</sup>*

The phenomenon of religious diversity has grown in prominence in contemporary philosophy of religion. Initially the problem was not seen as one of mutual understanding, as I have outlined it above. Rather concern about diversity came from dealing with conflicting truth claims, an issue which arose at the birth of modern philosophy of religion in the atheist–theist debate characteristic of Anglo-American philosophers of the twentieth century. Difference was seen as a logical or epistemological problem. If you have two claims that ‘conflict’, they cannot both be true. ‘How can “ultimate reality” be both a personal being and an impersonal principle, identical to our inmost self and forever “other”, loving and utterly indifferent, good and amoral, knowable and unknowable, a plentitude and “emptiness”?’<sup>4</sup> Instead of adjudicating the claims, the atheist often argued that *both* are probably false. Hume claimed that in matters of religion, ‘whatever is different is contrary’; as it is impossible that all the different religions are telling the truth, we should doubt that any of them is established on a solid foundation.

Partly driven by the need to defend against this atheist challenge, and partly as a way of being nice to all religions, there have been various attempts at creating some unity, some unified understanding of religion as a solution to the problem.

John Hick proposed an interpretation of religion which became the foundation stone for contemporary understandings of religious pluralism. He based his theory on a central idea from the philosopher Immanuel Kant: that there is a difference between ‘things as we perceive them’ and ‘things as they are in themselves’. Hick suggested that we should make such a distinction when we consider Ultimate Reality; the many religions are ‘different human responses to the one divine Reality’, but Ultimate Reality as it is in itself we do not know. No-one has direct access to it or a privileged account of it and therefore each way of conceiving it is authentic, although different from all others.

This view proved to be popular and influential, but also controversial. Clearly it would be rejected by those who think they do have *the* right answer or *the* privileged account. Others stick resolutely to the idea that contradictory religious claims *cannot* both be true, no matter how polite we would like to be about differences.

### **Raimundo Panikkar's 'four attitudes'**

#### **Exclusivism**

*A believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his religion to be true. Now, the claim to truth has a certain built-in claim to exclusivity. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true. And if a certain human tradition claims to offer a universal context for truth, anything contrary to that 'universal truth' will have to be false.*

#### **Inclusivism**

*In the present world one can hardly fail to discover positive and true values – even of the highest order – outside of one's own tradition. Traditional religions have to face this challenge. The most plausible condition for the claim to truth of one's own tradition is to affirm at the same time that it includes at different levels all that there is of truth wherever it exists. The inclusivistic attitude will tend to reinterpret things in such a way as to make them not only palatable but also assimilable.*

#### **Parallelism (often now called pluralism)**

*If your religion appears far from being perfect and yet it represents for you a symbol of the right path and a similar conviction seems to be the case for others, if you cannot dismiss the religious claim of the other nor assimilate it completely into your tradition, a plausible alternative is to assume that all are different creeds which, in spite of meanderings and crossings, actually run parallel to meet only in the ultimate, . . . at the very end of the human pilgrimage. Religions would then be parallel paths and our most urgent duty would be not to interfere with others, not to convert them or even to borrow from them, but to deepen our own respective traditions so that we may meet at the end, and in the depth of our own traditions.*

#### **Interpenetration**

*The more we come to know the religions of the world, the more we are sensitive to the religiousness of our neighbour, all the more we begin to surmise that in every one of us the other is somehow implied, and vice-versa, that the other is not so independent from us and is somehow touched by our own beliefs. We begin to realize that our neighbour's religion does not only challenge, but may even enrich, our own, and that ultimately, the very differences which separate us are somewhat potentially within the world of my religious convictions. We begin to accept that the other religion may complement mine and we may even entertain the idea that in some particular cases it may well supplement of my beliefs provided that my religiousness remains an undivided whole.<sup>5</sup>*

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Critique of Hick has also come from the more radical as well as from the more conservative. Such critics have queried: How does Hick know? If we cannot know the Ultimate Reality as-it-is-in-itself, how can we still know that all the different religions are authentic representations of it?

Hick's view also makes the various religions themselves, especially their more real-life aspects of practice and identity, relatively unimportant. But for many believers these concrete aspects of religious life are extremely precious and part of its identity. A comparatively abstract and flavourless describing of their faith as their particular approximation to the Ultimate Reality as-it-is-in-itself, does not adequately reflect its way of life and the fullness of belief. Taking this approach forces other religions into a framework which may distort them.

Hick's language and philosophical framework are not religiously and culturally neutral, but are still shaped by a particular set of Western assumptions (though we should note also that not every Western philosopher is a follower of Kant's line). So the claim to have bypassed Western or Christian bias turns out to be deceptive.

#### A challenge to Hick and his popularity

*The modern myth of religion . . . is the conceptual framework upon which religious studies is based. It is the glue that holds together university departments of religion, school curricula, and publishing lists. There are a number of different components to the myth, and each time the story is retold it will appear in a slightly different form . . . Put simply, the myth is that there is one Ultimate Reality, God or The Transcendent, who is ontologically outside the world but who gives meaning and purpose to human relationships, to history and to suffering. This one unconditioned reality makes itself known to human individuals in special kinds of experiences, refracted through their different languages, symbols, and cultural institutions, implanting in them an awareness of moral codes and an underlying purpose of human life. These experiences lead them to strive for greater awareness of the unconditioned, to formulate doctrines and rituals and to form voluntary associations of the dissemination and celebration of this mystical knowledge. Sometimes this mystical awareness remains confined to limited sects and cults, and sometimes it permeates a culture, making it difficult for the analysts to decide where the truly religious elements should be demarcated from the non-religious ones. From time to time the transcendent being takes on limited human, animal, or demonic form and incarnates itself into the world as saviors, subordinate deities, enlightened masters, sons of God, prophets, bodhisattavas, gurus, and divine kings to show people the true way or to remind them of the path to deliverance. These paths are many since they are refracted through the different media or different cultures, but the goal is one.<sup>6</sup>*

Can you, indeed, or *should* you, ask and answer the question on the level that Hick does: focusing on the wholesale justification of entire religions and their relations? We could start from different premises, like the following:

We cannot give an abstract, theoretical account of how different religions interrelate. The relation between religious traditions is not a one-size-fits-all affair. How we understand 'Christianity vs. Judaism' cannot be given the same kind of answer as 'Buddhism vs. Islam'. The relations between various religions have to be addressed individually for historical, philosophical and theological accuracy.

We can only give specific, scholarly accounts of how particular cultures or traditions have interacted in particular historical periods and places; not 'Christianity vs. Islam' as such.

Similarly, we can only compare religious traditions and their accounts of themselves on the level of detail. We can compare and analyse different doctrines, philosophical arguments or religious ideas while not claiming to show a specific relation between the whole of these traditions.

Much of this book will undertake such an enquiry, as far as the philosophical ideas of different religions are concerned.

Finding a way to relate different traditions, moreover, must be addressed from *within* some particular community. How you express interfaith understanding as a Muslim will use different texts, beliefs and theologies from the Jew. A Hindu may have no trouble at all considering that a different religion's claims may be true, while an evangelical Christian may find it impossible.

A single account, whether philosophical or theological, of religious pluralism will not suffice. There can be no 'global' account of religious pluralism which will explain the existence of many faiths to the satisfaction of all. Such accounts are written for a specific audience (often a specific faith or indeed a specific denomination or sect within a broader grouping). Any account of religious pluralism is an important act of rhetoric: designed to persuade a particular audience to see this puzzling religious complexity in a particular way.

#### **Interfaith accounts from within religious traditions**

##### ***Tariq Ramadan: A Muslim argument for interfaith dialogue***

*So individuals, innocent and free, have to make their choices (either to accept or to reject the Revelation); there will necessarily be diversity among people, and so these three seemingly similar verses contain*

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*teachings that augment and complete each other: 'Had God so willed, He would have united them [human beings] in guidance, so do not be among the ignorant'; (Qur'an 6:35) 'If your Lord had so willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Is it for you to compel people to be believers?'; (Qur'an 10:99) 'If God had willed, He would have made you one community but things are as they are to test you in what He has given you. So compete with each other in doing good.' (Qur'an 5:48) The first verse instructs us that diversity is willed by the Transcendent, the second makes clear that, in the name of that will, compulsion in matters of religion is forbidden,\* and the Revelation teaches that the purpose of these differences is to test us in order to discover what we are going to do with what has been revealed to us: the last commandment is to use these differences to 'compete in doing good.' Diversity of religions, nations, and people is a test because it requires that we learn to manage difference, which is in itself essential: 'If God did not enable some men to keep back others, the world would be corrupt. But God is the One who gives grace to the words'; (Qur'an 2:251) 'If God did not enable some men to keep back others, hermitages, synagogues, chapels and mosques where the name of God is often called upon, would have been demolished.' (Qur'an 22:40) These two verses give complementary information that is of prime importance: if there were no differences between people, if power were in the hands of one group alone (one nation, one race, or one religion), the earth would be corrupt because human beings need others to limit their impulsive desire for expansion and domination. The last verse is more precise with regard to our present discussion; it refers to places of worship to indicate that if there is to be a diversity of religions, the purpose is to safeguard them all: the fact that the list of places begins with hermitages, synagogues, and chapels before referring to mosques shows recognition of all these places of worship and their inviolability and, of course, respect for those who pray there. So, just as diversity is the source of our test, the balance of power is a requirement for our destiny. Difference might naturally lead to conflict: therefore, the responsibility of humankind is to make use of difference by establishing a relationship based on excelling one another in doing good. It is vital that the balance of power is based not on tension born of rejection or mutual ignorance but fundamentally on knowledge: 'O people, we have created you from a male and a female, we have divided you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another.' (Qur'an 49:13) Knowing the other is a process that is unavoidable if fear of difference is to be overcome and mutual respect is to be attained. So human beings live a test that is necessary for their nature but that they can – and must – master by making the effort to know and recognise those who are not of their tribe, their country, their race, or their religion. Dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, is indispensable.*

*\*[Tariq Ramadan's footnote:] The Qur'an confirms this in a clear general rule: 'No compulsion in religion' (2:256).<sup>7</sup>*

***Jonathan Sacks: A Jewish argument for interfaith dialogue***

*Judaism is a particularist monotheism. It believes in one God but not in one religion, one culture, one truth. The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind. . . . God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference. Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary, it is the idea that unity creates diversity. . . . Judaism is about the miracle of unity that creates diversity. . . . God no more wants all faiths and cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants his or her children to be the same. That is the conceptual link between love, creation and diversity. We serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity.<sup>8</sup>*

Of course, we can fall into the lazy habit of speaking of these religions as if they are heterogeneous blocks which are in de facto competition and conflict with other blocks. But that is not so. The major world religions that we have today are complex because they have evolved over a long period of time. In that time, they have bumped into each other, and into different philosophical cultures, and in the process have absorbed and been influenced by the ideas and problems they encountered. Sometimes they have adopted each other's answers; at other times they have adopted each other's questions. Even when they have not done this explicitly, they have absorbed and diffused influences like spices in a mixture rubbing their aromas onto one another.

An example of this mutual infusing is the historical interaction of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and the response of all three to ancient Greek philosophy. The religious framework or world view of these three monotheisms, with their emphasis on scriptural revelation, is quite different from the metaphysics of Plato or Aristotle. But paradoxically that meant that the philosophy did not necessarily contradict the tenets of their faith and could be adopted as a framework for articulating it. (However, this mix of different styles of reflection brewed up all sorts of new questions for the evolving faiths. We shall see examples of this in the chapters that follow.)

This 'infusing' does not mean that one of these traditions cannot remain truly itself without confusion or syncretism, even when it has taken on a whiff of something else. Soon, indeed, that flavour has become so much a part of it that it ceases to be foreign, as mind-body dualism, or a belief in an immortal soul, flavoured Christianity, ideas that had no

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clear biblical basis and were not part of its earliest form, yet are taken for granted by contemporary Christians. Religions do not necessarily compromise their identity in this process; they amplify it. They do not cease to be what they were; this is how they became what they are.

Christianity would not be what it currently is without Greek philosophy, which infused it in a manner quite different from its impact on Judaism or Islam. You can describe the absorption of Greek philosophy (and its rejection) into Islam or Judaism by naming specific individuals or movements. On Christianity, however, it was truly formative.

On other occasions we can more accurately picture it as the same or similar ingredients turning up all over; just as dairy products or noodles make their appearance in cuisines all round the world. The idea that God is infinite, though not a universal idea, is not a notion that had to be taught to one culture by another.

Sometimes related but not identical ingredients occur in traditions, which can form a kind of analogy to one another. The idea that God is beyond all attributes or characteristics appears in the Indian notion of *nirguna Brahman* and in the Christian *via negativa*, as well as mystical traditions in Judaism and Islam. The apodictic tradition in Christianity and *nirguna Brahman* are not merely 'the same idea', however.

And of course ingredients can be borrowed, ironically even in hostile exchanges, much as Western traders brought back spices from the East to flavour Western cuisines. Even when the three Western monotheisms were in conflict with one another, they tended to borrow arguments for the existence of God.

It is not always a gentle affair. We can see this in the sharp conflicts within Islamic thought, particularly characterized in al-Ghazālī's critique of 'philosophers' and the rebuttal of al-Ghazālī by Ibn Rushd. There is frequently a conflict between those who prize what they perceive as the purity of the tradition, and those who are excited by the new exotic possibilities on offer in the philosophical bazaar.

Similarities between religio-philosophical debates in different faiths are inescapable. Despite the enormous difference that a belief in Jesus and salvation makes for Christian theology, we still find that Islam and Christianity share a controversy: between free will and predestination in the question of who goes to heaven and why. Hindus and Buddhists were fierce in their debates, and Jains and Hindus profoundly different on the question of a deity; and yet they all share a belief in karma. These similarities can arise for different reasons. Some of these are:

Problems that can arise from similar doctrines: for example, transcendent monotheism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or the juxtaposition of a belief in rebirth and ethical thinking in the Indian religions. The problems may appear when you start to reflect within

those boundaries. If you believe in a single all-powerful God, sooner or later you are going to wonder what that means in the context of human evil actions.

Certain problems seem almost to lie in the structure of situations; like when you combine belief in sacred texts that must be respected with free philosophical speculation, and give rise to a 'revelation vs. reason' problem. Similarly, when you attempt to reconcile religious demands of faith and logical constraints in any tradition you can create a 'faith vs. reason' conflict.

Sometimes different religions' philosophers all read the same books. Jews, Christians and Muslims all read Aristotle and encountered the same problem for divine knowledge after reading chapter 9 of *On Interpretation*.

And of course they read each other. Aquinas not only read Aristotle, he read 'Rabbi Moses' (Maimonides). The Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd arguably had more influence on Christians than on Muslims.

The implications of this history of interaction are rather interesting.

At the moment, it seems there may be a new, emerging discipline of 'comparative philosophy' or a multi-faith approach to philosophy of religion. But the history I have sketched here shows that such a state of affairs is hardly some politically correct or fashionable new enterprise. Rather this is what philosophers have always done; they have always been 'promiscuous' in what they read and react to. So philosophers who currently attempt to engage with the thought of different religions, although *avant garde* in regard to recent practice in the West, are also deeply traditional.

Insofar as philosophers' contribution in shaping of their own tradition has been influenced by the thinking of other religions, it would seem that you cannot fully understand one religion without understanding the others who have been its nearest neighbours.

Finally, it also relativizes the modern 'emergence' of conflicting truth claims. This is not, after all, some postmodern problem raised to challenge religious faith for the first time in our lifetime. Religions have conflicted for millennia and their adherents have not only noticed this, but also taken account of this in their philosophical reflection. Does it, as Flew alleged, suggest that none of their claims can be true? That is a dangerous suggestion for a philosopher to make. For of course, philosophy itself is beset with conflicting claims. If the sheer fact of disagreement was enough to discredit a whole enterprise, philosophers would have to give up talking about truth, consciousness, the mind and the body, knowledge, induction and ethics and resign en masse from their university posts. What the

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history of both philosophy and philosophical theology shows, however, is that people who call themselves philosophers generally know how to resolve these issues: by following broadly agreed rules for fair play and the etiquette of how to keep the conversation going.

It is important to recognize, then, that religions are not monolithic, massive systems which are internally self-consistent and irrevocably in conflict with one another. Every religious tradition of any antiquity is made of strands of traditions, ideas, tendencies, stances. Some of these strands are internally in conflict with one another, such as the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims on the use of *ijtihad*, or the conflicts between Lutheranism and Catholicism on the use of philosophy or reason. Meanwhile, some of those strands are in harmony or even total agreement with strands in other religious traditions. Islam had its conflicts on the merits of philosophy and independent reason, and its debates were remarkably similar to the Christians'. This means that some Muslims would agree with some Christians on the issue, and disagree with their fellow Muslims.

So when you disentangle a religion's philosophies, there are predictable and unpredictable areas of agreement and contradiction with other religions. Each of those strands is just about the right size for a single debate. Its assumptions, issues and problems can be examined in a single 'frame'. So this book does not 'compare Christianity and Islam'. We are not even talking about 'Christianity vs. Islam' on a single debate such as whether or not God can do what is logically impossible. We are talking about a debate in which the Christian and the Muslim who say God *can* do the logically impossible take issue with the Christian and the Muslim who say God *cannot*. This makes for a game in which all the religions for whom this is an issue can take part, pitching in their arguments, on a level playing field.

It seems that trying our best to begin a philosophical investigation in the proper manner, by defining our central term, has yielded some interesting results.

To start with, simply trying to define the term has led not to a tidy and abstract clarity, but rather to dispute. In the first place, there is disagreement over what should be counted as a 'religion' and what should be excluded. Next, some people challenge whether the term really refers to a valid phenomenon or not. Others, going further, suspect that the very creation and use of the term, if not quite sinister, at least falsifies reality and distorts the picture. If you find this annoying, I'm afraid you will have to become accustomed to it. Philosophy is often like this.

In the meantime, however, we did uncover something interesting: the concrete and colourful fact of religious diversity. The different paths that people follow, and the experience of being in the real world with many different faiths milling around, is surely part of what we should study.

This phenomenon alone – religious diversity – is a topic for philosophical discussion.

However, the investigation suggests that trying to understand ‘religion’ is going to be tricky, for there is not even agreement on what religion is or what counts as a religion. Moreover, the different bodies of thought and practice that form the basis of our study, formed as they were within different cultures, raise the question: how does one go about studying them wisely and well? That will be the focus of our next chapter.

### Draw your own conclusions

Could we do without the category of ‘religion’ applied to different cultures? Do you think its usefulness outweighs any alleged problems?

Does any one of Panikkar’s ‘four attitudes’ express your stance? What do you think are its strengths, and the shortcomings of the others?

‘The tolerance you have is directly proportional to the myth you live and inversely proportional to the ideology you follow’ (Panikkar).<sup>9</sup> How do you interpret this, and do you agree?

In the quotations in the textbox on pp. 10–12, do you think Ramadan and Sacks are saying the same thing, but to different audiences? Or do you think the points they are trying to make are quite different?

### Further reading

- Barnes, Michael (2002) *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Fitzgerald, T. (2000) *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press
- Hick, John (2004) *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd edn, Basingstoke, Macmillan
- Panikkar, R. (1984) *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, New York, Paulist Press
- Ramadan, T. (2004) *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Sacks, J. (2002) *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London and New York, Continuum

**Notes**

1 See 'Religion: A Western Invention?', in H. Haring, J. M. Soskice and F. Wilfred (eds) (2003) *Learning from Other Faiths*, Concilium, London, SCM Press.

2 G. Griffith-Dickson (2000) *Human and Divine: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religious Experience*, London, Duckworth.

3 T. Fitzgerald (2000) *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, p. 10.

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