

The Concept of Religion
Defining and Measuring Contemporary Beliefs and Practices
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The study of religion has traditionally proceeded along different lines that involve different emphases and discourses. On the one hand are studies from within particular faiths or denominations that help define their particular doctrines, lived beliefs and ritual practices. Such studies vary in the methods they employ and the emphasis they give to different aspects of religious phenomena, according to the social and historical context in which they are placed. On the other hand, there are studies which examine religion as a *sui generis* category – that is as an abstraction from its lived and believed tradition. Such studies tend to employ theological or philosophical methods to address issues in areas such as ethics and metaphysics. Still another strand emphasises similarities and contrasts in which religions are compared with regard to assumed functions while usually drawing upon multiple disciplines.

The idea of religion as a matter for scientific attention dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, where it was conceptually, theoretically, and empirically elaborated as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Anthropology developed a long-standing tradition in ethnographic research, and classical social scientists like Durkheim, Weber, and Freud still represent foundational approaches in the conceptualisation of religion. Empirical research on religion has expanded since the sixties, and is now well integrated into the disciplines of sociology, psychology and anthropology. Today, 'religion is everybody's favourite dependent variable', to quote Geertz. A host of theories are employed in an attempt to understand why and how religion is experienced or expressed in various social, cultural and national contexts. Religion can also be said to represent a favourite independent variable, as witnessed by the growing number of surveys in which religion is used alongside other explanatory variables in the study of a wide range of cultural phenomena.

Alongside, and sometimes at odds with, explanatory and mostly social-scientific approaches to religion are more descriptive and interpretative approaches. With their idiographic claims and qualitative designs, these theories often display close affinities with disciplines of language and the arts. Narrative or discourse-related theories interpret the significance of religion among smaller populations at a micro-level of research. Detailed case studies shed light on the rhetorical devices employed in religion, the semiotic structures of meaning exchange and the plot orientation of biographical analyses of spiritual careers. Phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches put an emphasis on clarifying processes of religious communication and interpretation. As such they can be said to inductively construct more reality informed notions of contemporary beliefs and practices, while at the same time doing justice to the immense variety of religious expression.

The recent growth in spiritual neuroscience reflects yet another approach to the empirical study of religion: the attempt to correlate brain activity and neural networks with specific spiritual experiences or religious behaviours. Here, research seeks to identify not only the coherence of biological functionality and religious meaning, but also aims to identify the evolutionary basis of religion. Although this 'neuro-theology' has led to rather ambitious assumptions and a growth in popular publications that seem to exaggerate the modest empirical findings, it nevertheless represents an

innovative avenue of research. Its promise lies in new interdisciplinary relationships, the use of advanced technology and the interaction with philosophical notions of mind. Experimental science is being brought into conjunction with core phenomena of religion, such as meditation and prayer, religious and mystical experiences, and the mental functions that might underlie ritual and myth.

This list of conceptual and empirical approaches to the study of religion represents a brief outline of discourses that are ever expanding and developing. While there is every reason to be positive about the fruit of scientific interest in religion, the need to be clear about the conceptualization of religion remains ever more pressing. Should religion be defined from denominational analysis and theological consistency, or should it be redefined in terms of more universal human functions? To what extent do theoretical notions of religion still relate to religion as it is lived in contemporary times and understood by ordinary people? Theoretical considerations about the conceptualization of religion sit alongside methodological considerations about the operationalization of religion in empirical research. Are our arguments for specific concepts in religion sufficiently backed by good measuring instruments? Are standards, such as repeatability and consistency in measurement accepted prerequisites in research, or do standards vary according to specific methodical choices or methodological assumptions?

And, finally, the aim of empirical research in theology needs to be kept under constant scrutiny. Do we perform empirical research in theology solely for academics who work in this field, or do we also address other audiences in faith communities and in society at large? What is the relationship between our choice of concepts and measures of religion, and the significance of our findings for religion-related problems that confront societies today?

Now that we can no longer assume a simple harmony between the scientific concept of religion, church doctrine and practiced belief, issues concerning the definition and measurement of religion are becoming crucial for academic institutions. At a growing number of universities, theology as a discipline is being relocated in the wider discourses of the humanities and the social sciences. Faculties of religious studies now include new alliances of interests and approaches which will inevitably result in changing emphases for empirical research. While this new environment is both stimulating and promising, the theological nature of such research needs to be carefully scrutinized and understood. Thus, for instance, tensions between ideal and fact remain crucial and require that the dynamic of normative and descriptive claims in research is attended to as we move forward. These fundamental issues move questions about the validity, reliability and objective of empirical research in religion from simple methodology to a developing vision of empirical research in the service of theology, a vision that motivates this conference.

Thus, the conference theme will discuss concepts and measures of religion, highlighted from various paradigms, while clarifying basic principles of empirical research. The discussion will be in the context of the changing academic landscape which forms the backdrop for the study of religion today. You are cordially invited to participate in and contribute to this conference. We would particularly welcome papers that address theoretical issues related to the conceptualization of religion, or those that illustrate the way in which particular aspects of religion can be operationalized in the service of empirical research.