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Closed and open conceptions of religion: The problem of essentialism in teaching about religion¹

Torsten Hylén

1. Introduction

Although the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ have been discussed for decades in other countries – perhaps foremost in the United States and the United Kingdom – debates of this nature have been almost non-existent in Sweden. Few books and articles published in Swedish have seriously addressed the conceptualization of religion. Until relatively recently, a phenomenological approach to religion has prevailed and has seldom been questioned. During the last decade, this approach has in many cases been replaced by more constructivist ways of viewing religion. However, this change has not occurred consistently throughout religious studies higher education, and what little discussion has emerged has hardly reached beyond academic contexts.²

Having spent approximately 15 years as a teacher of religious studies, primarily for prospective religion teachers in public schools, I have reached an increasingly strong conclusion that many students unconsciously carry with them an essentialist view on religion, a perception that they acquired during their childhood. Additionally, through discussions with students in the teachers’ education programme who have relatively fresh experiences from their own schooling or who have interned in public schools, I have learned that many active religion teachers in Swedish schools have perceptions about religion that are more or less

¹ A previous version of this article has been published in Swedish (Hylén 2012).

² Perhaps the first general discussion in Swedish about the concept of religion that took a critical position toward essentialist perceptions was Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2003, originally published in Norwegian). A recently published book that includes a discussion about the Western and Christian basis for the concept of religion is Hellman (2011). Also new is Hjärpe (2012) which examines the conceptualization of religion in terms of the study of Islam in Sweden. Other scholars who critically discuss the concept and the study of religion are Andersson and Sander (2009) and Arvidsson (2004; 2012). Brief discussions about the concept of religion are included in books on Islam published by islamologists from Lund, such as Otterbeck (2000, Ch. 2) and Roald (2005, 14-29). In his doctoral thesis, Torsten Blomkvist (2002) discussed a traditional conceptualization of religion that can be applied in the study of ancient Scandinavian religion.

essentialist.³ Therefore, the present article is oriented primarily towards students who intend to become teachers of religion, as well as current religion teachers. Of course, I hope others will also find it interesting.

2. Essentialism and the problem of boundaries

Essentialism is the view that some properties of an object are necessary, whereas others are incidental. Essentialist positions also emerge in contexts other than religion. Common forms of essentialism are racism, sexism, and nationalism; that is, perceptions that human races, genders, or nations compose well-defined entities that have certain specific characteristics necessary for their identity, while other features are temporary. Thus, one could imagine statements such as these: “The black race has a physical constitution that is adapted to physical work” (racism), “Women are by nature more caring than men” (sexism), or “It is important to preserve Swedishness in Sweden, and not allow other cultural elements to come in and destroy it” (nationalism).

These forms of essentialism have been criticized because they have led to contempt for other people, oppression, and sometimes even to genocide. In these cases, essentialism has been combined with a value hierarchy, which entails the idea that certain races or nations or genders are superior to other(s) and have a right to assert their own position at the cost of the other(s). Similar perceptions have been asserted in religious contexts. A number of examples, including the Christian crusades during the Middle Ages, Jewish fundamentalism in today’s Israel, ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism on superiority over religious minorities in countries such as India and Sri Lanka, or Islamic terrorism, can all be viewed as expressions of religious essentialism of a sort that creates violence and oppression. However, religious essentialism does not necessarily have these negative consequences. In fact, all forms of religious faith are essentialist. The adherent of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or any other religious movement, necessarily has to assert that his or her own belief has certain characteristics that are foundational; for example, that God exists and has revealed himself, or that everything composes a unit and that if we acquire the right knowledge about it, we can avoid the cycle of rebirth. Even the person who has some kind of inclusive perception about the religions – for example that all religions lead to salvation – assumes that religion as such has certain characteristics that make it religion.

³ However, I have not performed a formal investigation about teachers’ perceptions of religion.

In this article, however, I am not primarily interested in religious essentialism, but the kinds of essentialist expressions that emerge within studies, research, and instruction about religion in academia and in school.⁴ In these contexts, essentialist perspectives are also very common. Later, I will provide some examples of essentialist positions among scholars of religion, before proposing an alternative way to relate to religion in instruction and research. First, however, I would like to comment briefly on the basic problem and then provide a short background of how the history of religion as a scientific discipline has changed over the last 150 years.

Applying an essentialist position to such a complex phenomenon as religion presents a series of problems. Such an exercise is largely about drawing boundaries between what belongs to the phenomenon and what does not; in other words, to indicate what makes up the essence of religion in general or an individual religion in particular. The difficulty is that, regardless of where one draws the boundary between what is and what is not religion, certain phenomena that are generally viewed as religion will end up outside that boundary, or what is generally not viewed as religion will be included. Of course, anyone has the right to define religion as she or he wishes; however, if the definition deviates too much from the general understanding, it will be difficult to communicate and share this perception with others. Problems can also arise to someone who attempts to study cultures that have an entirely different way of viewing that which we call religion.

The American anthropologist Benson Saler maintains that religion and the designations of the different religions are Western *folk categories*. In other words, they are concepts and categories that have emerged in our societies over the course of several centuries, that generally work very well, and are taken as self-evident by most people who have been raised in Europe or North America (Saler 2000, 21–23). Only when the Western folk category meets other ways of viewing what people in the West call religion, do problems arise. This can happen either through migration of people between cultures or when scholars of religion attempt to study other cultures on site. Somehow, we need to make clear, in a way that works constructively during encounters with other cultures and forms of religion, to ourselves and each other what we mean when we talk about religion and religions. The question is how.

⁴ This does not mean, of course, that all students, scholars, and teachers would lack personal faith. On the contrary, some of the examples that I present below demonstrate the opposite. The idea that I want to convey is rather that in a secularized Western context of research and teaching, personal faith is normally kept in the background in order to avoid it affecting the results.

Any attempt to provide an essentialist definition of religion will be met with criticism and new definitions.

Scholars of religion sometimes create methodological or stipulated definitions of religion. They are created for specific objectives such as research projects, and are not for general use. Therefore, such definitions do not say what religion is, but only how the concept of religion is used in a specific context. I will not deal with these kinds of definitions here.

3. Perceptions of religion within the history of religions

I am a historian of religions, and most of the examples that I will address also come from scholars of the history of religions. Therefore, I want to begin by providing a short overview of how ideas about what religion is and how it should be studied have changed over time within the academic discipline that is now designated as the history of religions.⁵ I wish to show that perceptions of religion have not been constant, even within academic research in the West. In the book *Nytt blick på religion (New Views on Religion)*, the Norwegian historians of religions Ingvild Saelid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson discuss three paradigms within the discipline of the history of religions that have succeeded each other from the late 1800s to the present day (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001).⁶ The *evolutionist* paradigm was prevalent from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. The basic notions of this paradigm were taken from Darwin's theory of evolution. The underlying idea was that not only nature, but also society and culture, had undergone a development from lower to higher stages and that cultural development had occurred according to a predetermined pattern. The arrangement of stages of development differed somewhat between different scholars; thus, Edward Tylor (1823–1917), to whom I return below, postulated a development from animism via polytheism to monotheism. James Frazer (1854–1941), on the other hand, discussed development from a stage of magic to a stage of religion, which continues to move closer to the stage at which science prevails in a society. Different cultures develop at various speeds, but always follow the same development scheme. Thus, the evolutionists argued, it is possible to compare various cultures and religions from different historical periods. A common feature of the evolutionists was that they all viewed Christianity as the most developed religion.

⁵ In her book, Hellman (2011) provides a broader overview of this subject.

⁶ Some of the scholars treated in this paragraph belonged to the discipline of anthropology rather than history of religions. These two disciplines have always been close.

In the mid-1900s, the *phenomenological* paradigm replaced the evolutionary one.⁷ The designation “phenomenology of religion” is an unclear collective name for an array of different approaches to the study of religion. Here, I will primarily describe the so-called hermeneutic phenomenology that counted individuals such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953), and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) as its foremost thinkers. An important point of departure for the phenomenological approach, according to Gilhus and Mikaelsson, is the religious person’s image of his (less often her) own faith. Therefore, the prototype of the religious person is someone who has the deepest religious experiences, the religious elite (usually men); that is, ascetics, mystics, prophets, and other similar persons. These individuals become the standard for perceptions of the correct interpretation of the religion. Hence, it is possible to talk about, for example, a religion’s “core” on the one hand, and its “popular expressions” on the other. Concepts such as “distorted variations” and “syncretism” are common. Since the self-image of religion is the starting point, the perception that the religion is “good” is part of the phenomenological paradigm (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001, 31–32). The hermeneutic phenomenology of religion opposed reductionism; that is, the attempt to “reduce” religion to something that can be explained solely by “inner-worldly” factors, such as psychological (e.g., Freud) or socio-economic (e.g., Marx). Instead, it was argued that religion is a *sui generis* category; that is, an entirely unique phenomenon that cannot be explained solely with the help of other sciences. In opposition to reductionist theories, many phenomenologists claimed that “the sacred” actually exists and reveals itself to humankind. Since religion is an entirely unique phenomenon, it is not necessary to study religions in their historical or cultural contexts; they should be studied in the context of each other. In other words, a religion should be studied primarily in relation to other religions, not in relation to the environment.

According to Gilhus and Mikaelsson, the *cultural studies* paradigm is currently replacing the phenomenological one. Within this paradigm, religion is studied as one of several aspects of culture. Here, the emphasis is on the interaction between what we call religion and other cultural phenomena. The communication between actors, both religious and non-religious, becomes important. “The exploration of the subject religion moves... from heaven down to earth” (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001, 35, my translation); that is, instead of having gods and the religious elite’s religion as a point of departure, the emphasis is on “common” people,

⁷ Gilhus and Mikaelsson discuss the phenomenological paradigm in several places, e.g. (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001, 31-34, 44-55)

both men and women. The existence of “the sacred” is not assumed. Instead, individuals’ expressions of faith are studied.

Essentialist attitudes toward religion exist within all three of the above-mentioned paradigms, but are clearly predominant in the first two. Even though the phenomenological paradigm is less common in the academic study of religion today, an essentialist understanding of religion lives on in the consciousness of many, perhaps most individuals in our society outside of the academic sphere. Political debates are conducted on the base of the idea that religion has an essence of some kind, and much of the criticism of religion from the so-called new atheism builds on this assumption. Explanations of religio-political events in different parts of the world, for example, are often based on an essentialist perception of religion. The Swedish scholar of Islam, Jan Hjärpe, discussed this issue in an article on the development of Islamic studies in Sweden. He writes:

In the debate in Sweden, certain ideas circulate that exist also in the political debate. One is the idea that religious belonging is *determining*, that it decides how people act. Another is the idea that religious traditions are *constants*, unchangeable, recognizable through the centuries. The third is that religious people follow the statements of religious *leaders*, and that what religious leaders say is therefore representative of the entire group. All of these three ideas are demonstrably inaccurate. (Hjärpe 2012, 273, my translation, emphases in original.)

Hjärpe continues by showing, firstly that religious people do not always behave as the traditional interpretations of the religion stipulate and that there are several normative systems other than the religious that must be taken into consideration and that are often prevalent. Secondly, religions and norm systems change constantly through new interpretations of rituals, decrees, and other symbols. Thirdly, religious people often do not care what their leader says. In my view, it is even possible to say that most religious people follow their leaders’ statements when it suits them; that is, when the social, political, or economic context does not conflict too much with the leaders’ decrees.

4. Essentialism and religion – an attempt at typology

Several kinds of essentialism are visible in the study of and teaching about religion. In the following pages, I provide a typology of some important forms. My hope is that this typology will help readers discover and identify expressions of essentialism when they appear in different contexts. The model presented below is far from complete. My purpose is to highlight the most common forms of essentialism, including those which a beginner in the field of religious studies is most likely to encounter.

I have avoided using the term “essentialist” to denote the scholars in my examples. Firstly, it is difficult to know to what degree their essentialism is conscious. As some of my examples show, those who express essentialist ideas about religion sometimes do so unconsciously, or at any rate without deeper reflection. Secondly, as the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking has noted, “essentialist” is a denigrating expression; most people do not readily speak of themselves as essentialists (Hacking 1999, 17). Thus, I will rather speak of essentialist expressions or essentialist formulations.

Furthermore, I occasionally talk of “believers” when referring to adherents of religious traditions. I use this expression merely as an ellipsis for a space-consuming and more complicated designation. It is not my intention to maintain that religion is mainly a matter of belief.

Expressions of essentialism can either concern the religion’s *substance* or the religion’s *function*. By religion’s substance, I mean an expression of essentialism that is about what religion or individual religions *are*, while the religion’s function expresses what the religion *does* to people. I have chosen to divide each of these categories into two subdivisions.

Substance of religion

Theological or transcendental essentialism

Core essentialism

Function of religion

Positive essentialism

Negative essentialism

The designations positive and negative essentialism are short forms of the longer and clumsier positively and negatively *evaluating* essentialism. Of course, it is open to discussion whether the function of a phenomenon can be categorized as its essence. When I refer to positive and negative essentialism, however, I mean statements that assume that religion as such, or individual religions, are good or whether they cause harm to people. If that which is supposed to be religion lacks this quality, it is in fact not religion. Instead, the proponents of this kind of essentialism argue, it is something different, such as politics or culture in a religious disguise. In itself, essentialism concerning the function of religion is a necessary, but not sufficient criterion for what composes religion. In order for a phenomenon to be counted as religion, or an aspect of it, it must have a positive (or a negative) effect on people, but it is

not enough that it does this. There are many things in the world that are good (or cause harm) that are not religion. Those who express a positive or negative essentialist position to religion already have an idea of what religion *is* – and therefore about its substance.

In the following section I will illustrate the model with some examples. First, I will discuss expressions of essentialism concerning religion's or an individual religions substance, then I will address their function.

4.1 Substance of religion

4.1.1 Theological or transcendental essentialism

By theological or transcendental essentialism, I mean the notion that religion is dependent on a transcendental power of some sort – this power might be called the sacred, divine, or something else – that reveal itself/themselves to people. An excellent example of this is found in the work of the German theologian and historian of religions Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), who in his 1917 book *Das Heilige* with an English translation in 1924 called *The Idea of the Holy* (here, I refer to the 1936 edition). At the beginning of the book, Otto writes:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings. (Otto 1936, 8)

Otto here says that there is no point for those readers who cannot remember a specific religious experience in reading further, because they will not understand what the book is about. For Otto, religion and the experiences and feelings that constitute it cannot be described with help of other concepts or categories. He talks about the *numinous* feeling⁸ that only arises in the meeting with a higher power (Otto 1936, 10–11). This power manifests itself for the person as a *mysterium tremendum*. The feeling of *mysterium* arises as it is something unutterable and impossible to describe in human terms. It is a *mysterium tremendum* because it inspires feelings of reverence, superiority, and energy. At the same time, however, it is *fascinans* – fascinating and magnetic. This type of experience is unique to religion: “There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name” (Otto 1936, 6).

A more modern representative of this form of essentialism is the above-mentioned Mircea Eliade, who has been tremendously influential. In the book *The Sacred and the Profane*,

⁸ From the Latin *numen*, which designates a transcendent power.

which has been translated into many languages and published in large editions, Eliade writes: “Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*” (Eliade 1959, 11, emphases in original).⁹ Religions are based on these hierophanies and individuals’ reactions to them. Therefore, a starting point here is that “the sacred” exists and manifests itself to people.

This form of essentialism often entails the idea that people have an inherent religious need, a predisposition or instinct to search for “the sacred.” Otto and Eliade, as well as the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), held this perception.

When scholars of religion use theological or transcendental essentialism, it is almost always applied to religion as a general category. Individual religions constitute historically and culturally determined variants of this manifestation. Understandably, believing people often mean that precisely the manifestation that *they* have experienced is true or genuine. As I have stated above, though, my focus will remain on the secular study of religion.

4.1.2 Core essentialism

In the following section, I will examine the form of essentialism that argues for the existence of other fundamental characteristics that determine what religion is, rather than a transcendent or sacred power that reveals itself to humanity.¹⁰ Among such features are, for example, ideas, concepts, actions or feelings that are specific to religion as such or to an individual religion. A core essentialist position in relation to religion as an all-encompassing category differs somewhat from the core essentialism that concerns individual religions, so I will address each position in turn.

The most common form of essentialism within religious studies is based on the idea that religion as such has one or several traits that characterize it and that compose what is and what is not religion. Numerous scholars of religion have attempted to create definitions of religion, and during most of the 20th century, the absolute majority of these have been of the sort that I have classified as core-essentialist.¹¹ Below are some examples, with brief comments, of definitions of this type.

⁹ The term *hierophany* comes from the Greek *hieros* (holy) and *phainomai* (appear).

¹⁰ The designation “Core essentialism” is of course a tautology that I have used for want of a better name.

¹¹ In chapters 3 and 4 of the book *Conceptualizing Religion*, Benson Saler (2000) lines up a long series of such definitions and discusses and criticizes each of them.

One of the simplest and still most influential definitions of religion is that which the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) presented in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*,¹² in which he argues that religion is “the belief in spiritual beings” (quoted in Sharpe 1986, 56). As was the case for most scholars who worked with religion from a comparative perspective at that time, the question that primarily occupied Tylor was the origin of religion. For Tylor, this origin could be found in peoples’ questions about death and the difference between the living and the dead, as well as in the observation that dead and sleeping people showed similarities. So arose the belief in the soul as a separate entity, and this idea was furthermore applied to other creatures and natural phenomena. Additionally, the belief arose that these souls could act independently, free from the bodies to which they were normally bound. Tylor called this belief in souls *animism* (from the Latin *anima*, “soul” or “sense”). What distinguished Tylor from many of his contemporaries was his perception that “primitive” religion was something quite rational, and that “savages” were capable of thinking on the same level as his own contemporaries, with the clear exception that “the primitive individual” did not possess the same knowledge as a European at the turn of the 20th century. For Tylor, religion was primarily an intellectual phenomenon, with faith and philosophy as foundations for other aspects of the religion.

Another influential definition was formulated by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) in the article “Religion as a Cultural System.”¹³ Geertz’s definition is longer and more sophisticated than that of Tylor:

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973, 90)

Here, Geertz is stating that religion is a system of symbols that creates strong and long-term sentiments and motivations in people. By symbols, he is not referring only to that which we might mean by a symbol: for instance a sign, a small image, or a logotype. For Geertz, a symbol is every object, action, event, characteristic, or relationship that functions as a bearer of a concept, and he refers to that concept as the symbol’s “meaning.” Symbols work as models for people, both as models *of* reality and as models *for* how we should live and act (Geertz 1973, 91–94).

Tylor’s and Geertz’s definitions have both attracted criticism from various perspectives.¹⁴ The critique that I want to bring out here is that both definitions place religion’s real centre in

¹² This presentation of Tylor’s perception of religion builds on Sharpe (1986, 53-58) and Morris (1987, 98-103).

¹³ The article was first published in 1966, but was later reprinted in Geertz (1973).

the interior of the human being. Many critics have argued that these definitions present a Western, or even (protestant) Christian perception of religion. Faith, feelings, sentiments, and motivations are phenomena that occur commonly in Christianity, but often not in the same way in other religious traditions where, for example, actions or the fulfilment of religious law have much greater significance. Neither do all who confess to being Christian possess these mental states, at least not at all times. It is possible to be a passionate believer, and it is possible to exercise religion by force of habit or convention without necessarily placing a great deal of thought or feeling into religious exercise.

Neither Tylor nor Geertz would agree that religion is *only* associated with the inner life. However, by making these aspects into the basis for religion, both accomplish a simplification that causes much of the varied phenomena that we would otherwise call religion to be cut away.

Above, I have discussed that which I call core essentialism concerning religion as a general category. I will now look at some examples of similar positions toward specific religions. Here, the point is that a certain religion contains a core of truths, ideas, or behaviour that are specific to that religion. A person who does not accept or conform to the core does not belong to the religion. In many cases, a certain point in time (often the religion's "formative period," such as the early Christian church or Islam in Medina during Muhammad's time) or the religion's formation in a special geographic area (for example, Islam in the Arab world), is considered to be normative and to indicate the correct formation of the religion. The varieties of the religion that do not agree with this form can be referred to as "popular religion," "syncretic" or even "distorted forms" of the religion.

This approach is currently not particularly common among scholars of religion. It is generally accepted that there are different expressions of a religious tradition and that the scholar should relate neutrally to all of these. However, an example of the opposite is the book *Islam, the Straight Path* by the American scholar of Islam John L. Esposito (1988). It is an introductory book to Islam that has spread widely and has been translated into numerous languages. In the first three chapters of the book he describes Islam as a religion, its pre-modern history including the Prophet Muhammad's biography, the Qur'an, as well as the early political, theological, and legal development of the Muslim community. Chapters 4–6 address development in modern times. The book is used as course literature on Islam in

¹⁴ The best comprehensive critical discussion that I have found of these two definitions, with many references to other works, is Saler (2000, 88-104).

several universities, both in Sweden and in other countries. The book's popularity is reflected in the fact that it was published in an extended fourth edition in 2011 (Esposito 2011). The interesting point in the context of the present study is the description of Islam in the book's first three chapters. The picture presented there is very traditional and seems to build on an Arabic, "orthodox" Sunni form of Islam that, through the outline of the chapters, appears as more original than other variants (even if Esposito does not expressly say so). Sufism and the religious exercise within the Shiite branch of Islam are placed under the heading "Popular religion" in chapter 3. The outline, which has been maintained in the newest edition, indicates that Esposito regards the more "Shari'a-oriented" interpretation of Islam (either consciously or unconsciously) as the authentic form. Exactly what it is that makes Sufism and Shi'ism more popular variants than the Sunni, non-mystical form of Islam, is not clarified, but by placing these forms of the religion under "Popular religion," Esposito gives them a lower rank than the supposedly authentic Sunni form.

A more explicit expression of core essentialism is found in the book, *Abrahams Barn: Vad förenar och skiljer judendom, kristendom och islam? (The Children of Abraham: What Unites and Separates Judaism, Christianity and Islam?)* (1999) by the Swedish historian of religions Christer Hedin. Hedin compares Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with the primary aim of showing the great similarities that exist between the three religions, rather than the differences that otherwise are so often highlighted. In the introduction of the book, Hedin writes:

Over the centuries, the three religions have developed in different directions. Many external traits have changed and thereafter become part of the religions. These new features have often been taken from the surrounding culture and have later been incorporated into the religion. These new features have sometimes stood in conflict with the religion's basic principles. When people adhering to different religions have lived in each other's vicinities, they have adopted different external customs, a function of which have often been to create identity and a spirit of community within the group and to separate the supporters of the three religions from each other. However, these differences do not need to indicate a contradiction between the religious content in the three religions. On the theological and theoretical level, they can well agree. But as soon as a conflict or a competitive relationship arises, the differences come to the forefront. Then, the supporters of one religion highlight their distinctive features in order to differentiate themselves from the competitor or the opponent. It is ironic that the characteristics which are then emphasized, frequently have been taken from outside. The religions are in conflict with each other because of a teaching or a custom that they have borrowed from the surrounding culture. They fight for something that was not originally their own. This alone can be sufficient reason to thoroughly study what separates and unites the children of Abraham. They all have the same god and the same role model in faith. How can it be that they still are perceived as being so different? This is usually because of external factors that can be very important. (Hedin 1999, 10–11, my translation)

The above quotation includes examples of both types of core essentialism discussed above. According to Hedin, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each have their own core (although Hedin does not use this word in his text) that makes up their original and authentic base. The core consists of the "religious content" on "the theological and theoretical level" in each of

the three religions. “External characteristics” have later been added to the religious core, characteristics which have been taken from the surrounding culture and been incorporated within the religions with the purpose of marking the followers’ identities with respect to the followers of other religions. It is primarily the external characteristics, rather than the religious content, that cause strife between these religions.

Hedin seems to take for granted both a perception of what constitutes religion as a general category and of what characterizes each of the three religions discussed. As he puts it in the quotation, religion as such belongs to the theological and theoretical level. Consequently, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also have an original core, which consists of certain theological and theoretical ideas. The external additions did not originally belong to the religions (and probably not to religion as such either) but are taken from the surrounding cultures and later incorporated into the religions. The cores of the three religions do not cause strife. Perhaps it is even possible to talk of the core of religion in the singular. Anyway, it is easy to conclude that religion, in its original, pure form, without any disturbing additions, is peaceful and good. It is the additions that create conflict.

There are several problems with a perception such as that expressed by Hedin. How is it possible to determine what belongs to the core; that is, “religion’s basic principles”? Most scholars of religion would agree with Hedin that there are phenomena in religious traditions whose task is to create a sense of community within the group and differentiate them from other, competing groups, and that these are quite common. Thus, for example, it has been proposed that the number of daily prayers within Islam was established at five to contrast them with the three daily prayers in Judaism and the seven within the Syrian church’s monastic life (Rippin 2012, 108). However, few scholars would be prepared to refer to such identity-creating elements as “external additions” in contrast to “the religion’s basic principles,” especially concerning such important aspects of a religion as Islam’s five daily prayers.

What we call religion constantly changes, and the drawing of boundaries between what comprises a religion’s core and what is an external addition, or religion and culture, becomes quite arbitrary if it is performed by scholars of religion. (Adherents of religious traditions, on the other hand, have the right to interpret their tradition as they wish.) For example, what comprises the religious core of Judaism? The law as it was expressed in the Torah is there, but the interpretations of different aspects of it are totally different today compared to the time when the temple service was performed before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. In fact,

the very concept of law has undergone enormous development since the time of the second temple. It is possible to argue that rabbinic Judaism (the form of Judaism that is by far the most common today) differs from temple Judaism, in that the former hold the oral Torah – that is, the interpretations of the written law codified in the Talmud – to be an expression of God’s will (Goldenberg 1992). What, then, are Judaism’s “basic principles”? Similar objections can be raised about central ideas within Christianity and Islam.

In fact, precisely the figure that Hedin highlights as the common example in faith – Abraham – also functions as a differentiator within both Christianity and Islam toward the previous traditions. In the New Testament, Paul argues against Judaism by stating that Abraham became righteous through his faith and not through being circumcised and keeping the law (Rom. 4). In the Qur’an, we can read: “Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith” (Qur. 3:67, Arberry’s translation).

A particular problem in Hedin’s text is found in the first clause of the third last sentence in the quoted text: “They all have the same god...” What does Hedin actually mean by this? Here it seems that Hedin manifests what I call theological or transcendental essentialism. At the same time, it can hardly be viewed as a statement of faith, because Hedin does not express himself as a believing theologian, but as a historian of religions. Now, in a different part of the book where he compares different phenomena of the three religions, he further explains what he means. By saying that the three religions have the same god, Hedin simply means to say that the Hebrew and Arabic words for god are related.

In Arabic, god is named Allah, with the definite article *al* and a name of god that in its longer form reads *ilah* and in its shorter only *il*. It is the same word as the Hebrew *el*... The Bible’s god is named El, which shows that it is the same god [in Judaism] as in Christianity and Islam. (Hedin 1999, 213, my translation)

How Hedin can draw this conclusion about god’s ontological status from similarities between two closely related languages is not apparent.¹⁵

Hedin shows in several other places in his book that he is fully aware of the fact that religions change and are affected by their contexts. For example, he offers a rationale about Judaic law that is similar to my own above (Hedin 1999, 227). However, his basic thesis – that religions have certain foundational principles that constitute their “religious content,” that different “external additions” are subsequently added to these cores, and that the similarities

¹⁵ If the same reasoning is applied to Indo-European languages, for example, it would be possible to argue that Hindus and the French believe in the same God because the Sanskrit word *deva* (“divine being”) is related to the French word *dieu* (“God”).

primarily become visible in the key principles of a religion, while the differences are the most clear in the additions – this thesis is still clearly essentialist.

I do not mean to argue against searching for similarities between religions; after all, historians of religion have always worked with comparisons, and it is an important aspect of this discipline (Paden 1994, 1–5). The problem is that scholars and others that search for similarities sometimes do so with the implied premise that, if only the religious adherents understood how similar the religions are, then conflicts between them would be avoided. Below, I argue that this is the purpose of Hedin’s book. This notion often entails serious generalizations in order to demonstrate the many similarities between the religions. The religious traditions are not studied in their historical and social contexts; instead, the religions become each other’s contexts.

* * *

To summarize the above discussion, I would like to highlight two important arguments against core essentialism. The first is the problem of how to adequately delimit the concept of religion or the essence of an individual religion: Where do you draw the boundary? Who and what is included or left out, and why? In other words, core essentialist concepts of religion indicate unacceptable simplifications of the multi-faceted phenomena that we call religion. The second argument is the difficulty of determining who has the right to create such a boundary. Is it the scholar of religion? In that case, which of all of the scholars’ definitions should we accept? Or should we assign the task to the believers? Again, which believers should have the privilege of determining what the core of their religion is?

4.2 The function of religion

I will now move on to a discussion of essentialist perceptions regarding the function of religion or of specific religions in human life and society. As mentioned above, people who express an essentialist position on the function of religion almost always take their point of departure in a perception of the religion’s substance that is also essentialist. This is demonstrated in the following examples.

4.2.1 Positive essentialism

By positive essentialism I mean the perception that religion in general or a specific religion is characterized by factors such as love, peace, equality, or freedom of opinion; in short, values generally perceived as positive in liberal democracies. If a phenomenon is not what we consider to be “good,” then it is simply not an expression of true religion or of a correct interpretation of a certain religion. Interestingly, this type of essentialism is primarily expressed when someone talks about phenomena that are perceived as negative, and thus attempts to alienate religion from these. A common argument is that acts such as violence, war, and oppression take place in the *name* of religion or that religion is *used* for political purposes. By this kind of expression the idea is conveyed that a particular religion is not actually intended to be this way, but that it has been kidnapped by forces that use it for their own purposes.

This form of essentialism is expressed in the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s book *The Clash Within* (2007), which discusses the violence that ultranationalist Hindu groups have directed toward Muslims in Gujarat and other parts of India. Nussbaum says:

It would be a serious misreading of this book to see it as an assault on Hindu religion or Hindu traditions. All traditions have good and bad features. On the whole, however, the traditions of Hinduism have been strongly conducive to pluralism, toleration, and peace. What happened in Gujarat was not violence done by Hinduism; it was violence done by people who hijacked a noble tradition for their own political and cultural ends. Piety and spirituality would seem to play little or no role in the choices of Hindu-right politicians; nationalism plays an all-important role, and religious ideas and images are reconstructed for nationalistic purposes (as the loyal yet kindly monkey god Hanuman becomes a ferocious enemy of the Muslims, as even the playful candy-loving Ganesha becomes, at times, a muscled warrior with sword held high). (Nussbaum 2007, 8–9)

Nussbaum argues that even if Hinduism sometimes manifests negative characteristics, it generally promotes pluralism, tolerance, and peace. The violence against Muslims in Gujarat has not been exercised by Hinduism as such, but by people who have distorted it. I will briefly analyse two details of Nussbaum’s argument. Firstly, she differentiates between Hinduism as a religion and the people who interpret it. To her, Hinduism as a religious tradition is good on the whole. However, certain contemporary groups that have interpreted Hinduism have distorted the tradition. The second aspect of interest in Nussbaum’s argument is that she seems to perceive the core of Hinduism as piety and spirituality, in contrast to nationalistic politics and its effects. Thus, Hinduism is piety, but not politics (at least not of the nationalistic kind). This, I believe, is a clear example of how a form of core essentialism of the sort that I discussed above is behind a positive essentialization of Hinduism. In Nussbaum’s statement, the tradition becomes something that is independent of real people. The essence of Hinduism consists of certain values, such as pluralism, tolerance and peace,

piety and spirituality, that in Nussbaum's eyes represent what is good. Those whose interpretations of Hinduism do not agree with these values have distorted it – they are not real Hindus. Of course, it is possible here to pose a series of questions to Nussbaum, such as what Hinduism would be without people who interpret it; whether her own interpretation of Hinduism is not just one of many; and what criteria make it possible to determine whether her interpretation of Hinduism is more correct than that of Hindu Nationalists.

It is important to note that the brief quotation above is the only statement in Nussbaum's 400-page book that can be perceived as essentialism concerning Hinduism as religion and tradition. In many other parts of the book, Nussbaum clearly shows that she does not perceive Hinduism as an essence that is independent of the people who interpret it. I view this paragraph as a carelessly formulated defence in the beginning of the book. The author wants to show that she holds Hinduism in high esteem and that she is not out to criticize the religion as a whole, only a certain form of it. Yet, I have chosen to include this quote because it is a clear example of an essentialist formulation. It also shows that even those who study religion in more reflective ways can express themselves in a careless manner. The fact that Nussbaum is a philosopher and not a scholar of religion might explain this shortcoming.

My second example of positive essentialism is taken from the British author Karen Armstrong, whose popular books about religion have reached a large audience in different countries. Unlike Nussbaum, it is easy to find examples of essentialism in Armstrong's writings, although only one is discussed here. In the book *Islam*, she writes about the emergence of modern Islamism, and about one of its prominent figures, Sayyid Qutb:

The violent secularism of al-Nasser had led Qutb to espouse a form of Islam that distorted both the message of the Quran and the Prophet's life. Qutb told Muslims to model themselves on Muhammad: to separate themselves from mainstream society (as Muhammad had made the *hijra* from Mecca to Medina), and then engage in a violent *jihad*. But Muhammad had in fact finally achieved victory by an ingenious policy of non-violence; the Quran adamantly opposed force and coercion in religious matters, and its vision-far from preaching exclusion and separation-was tolerant and inclusive. (Armstrong 2002, 169–170)

Armstrong states here that the true interpretation of Islam denies that Muhammad exercised violence against his opponents. Thus, a positive interpretation of Islam (from the perspective of Armstrong's own values) is correct. Armstrong does not reflect on the fact that she, a non-Muslim, claims to present a better and more accurate interpretation of Islam than Sayyid Qutb, who as a believing Muslim for decades studied and attempted to understand God's will with his life and with the society in which he lived. There are certainly many Muslims who share Armstrong's interpretation, and if she had been a Muslim, her statement would have been a statement of faith. In that case, she would have had every right to express herself as

she does, and it would have been possible to view her statement as a contribution to an intra-Muslim debate. Instead, Armstrong wants to appear as a scholar of religion and as a scientific authority on the area; therefore, I feel it is necessary to make higher demands on her neutrality in interpreting the religious traditions she presents.

I will return to Christer Hedin for my third example. The purpose of Hedin's book *Abrahams barn (Abraham's Children)* is to show that there are great similarities between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and that the differences between them have been stressed too strongly (Hedin 1999, 7–9). However, he does not expressly say why it is important to display the similarities. My perception when reading this book is that what Hedin actually argues is that, if the followers of the three religions emphasized the core of their faith rather than the differentiating “external characteristics,” they would live in peace and harmony. In a short article in which he compares the three religions, just as he does in *Abrahams barn*, Hedin's text confirms, in my view, this interpretation:

If the religions will contribute to peace and harmony on earth, it is necessary to first eliminate the idea of having a monopoly on God and the truth. All good powers must co-operate for a better world. The three religions have the same moral message and the same hope for the future. That fellowship must not be obscured by a proclamation characterized by complacency and territorial thinking. (Hedin 2004, my translation)

The core of each of the three religions is good, while the additions often create problems. In this context, Hedin's reasoning about the ethics of the three religions is noteworthy. He states that one must distinguish between the religions' basic morals – in Hedin's terminology their “central ethics” – and the rules and ordinances – “signal ethics” – that are intended to promote inner cohesion and spirit of community as well as mark the boundary with other groups. According to Hedin, the tenets of the central ethics of the three religions could be summarized in four basic principles: stewardship, thirst for knowledge, kindness toward fellow human beings, and righteousness and peace (Hedin 1999, 245–250). Besides the fact that the very distinction between central ethics and signal ethics must be questioned for the same reasons as the division into the religions' cores and external additions, I would argue that the ethical conduct that Hedin highlights as basic in these three religions is in fact rather trivial. One could perhaps agree with Hedin that the principles listed are central (though I highly doubt that a majority of believing Jews, Christians and Muslims would accept that), but the main problem is the content given to these concepts by various representatives of the religious traditions. In other words, religious people have very different ideas of what the central ethical principles that Hedin has listed mean in practice.

Nussbaum, Armstrong, and Hedin all take their point of departure from their own values when assessing what is bad and good. Most of us consider acts of terror, such as the Jewish settler Barukh Goldstein's massacre of praying Muslims in Hebron on 25 February 1994, the extremist Christian pastor Paul Hill's murder of an abortion doctor in the United States on 29 July of the same year, or the attack that followers of al-Qaida directed toward the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, terrible deeds and feel that similar actions must be countered. However, the persons who planned and performed these deeds all felt that they were performing God's will. Their actions were a natural consequence of the struggle for the good social order that God wants to establish in the world, *against* true evil. They did not feel that they were *using* religion for political purposes. They believed that their actions had been decreed by God and were performed as a religious ritual.¹⁶

4.2.2 Negative essentialism

The antithesis of positive essentialism is negative essentialism, by which I mean the perception that religion or (less frequently among scholars of religion) a specific religion is irrational, oppressive, violent, et cetera; in short, represents values usually perceived as negative in liberal democracies. If something is not bad or causing harm, then it is simply not an expression of true religion or the correct interpretation of a certain religion.

As an example of negative essentialism, I use the well-known biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins' bestselling book *The God Delusion* (2006), in which he sharply criticizes all forms of religion. Dawkins' basic thesis is that all religion is built on the assumption that a god exists.¹⁷ Here, then, is the core-essentialist point of departure in his reasoning. According to Dawkins, belief in God does not build on any empirically verifiable facts. This belief has arisen as the result of a number of evolutionary side-effects; that is, characteristics that originally developed in humanity in order to give us better opportunities to survive in the world, but which have also been put to other uses (Dawkins 2006, 172–190). An example of such side-effects is our ability to ascribe intention and meaning to countless different phenomena. This behaviour is especially common in children. "Clouds are 'for raining.' Pointy rocks are 'so that animals could scratch on them when they get itchy'" (Dawkins 2006, 181). Evolutionary biologists often argue that this characteristic has developed in order to

¹⁶ For discussions about these events, see e.g. Lincoln (2006, 1-18); Juergensmeyer (2003, 19-30); and Shahak and Mezvinsky (2004, 96-112)

¹⁷ Dawkins is conscious that there are a number of different types of supernatural beings, but he simplifies the discussion through talking about god, primarily the monotheistic God in which Jews, Christians and Muslims believe (Dawkins 2006, 35).

give humans better conditions for survival, for example through the capability to communicate with each other, or to be able to quickly interpret the behaviour of dangerous animals. A side-effect of this important characteristic is that we ascribe will and intention to all types of natural phenomena. Thus, for example, falling blocks of stone and thunder can be interpreted as having the intention to hurt humans because they are angry at us. From that point, the step to fully developed religion is very short.

The notion of evolutionary side-effects as the origin of religion is significantly more complex and sophisticated than what I have described here, and many scholars who work with evolutionary studies of religion (and who do not have the same negative positions towards it as Dawkins) work on the basis of this theory. Specific to Dawkins, however, is the idea that religion is carried on from generation to generation as *memes*. Dawkins has coined the concept of memes as a cultural equivalent to genes in biology, as details in the cultural heritage, such as ideas, actions, and symbols. Dawkins maintains that, just as genes are copied and biologically carried on from generation to generation, memes are copied between generations in the process by which a person is socialized into a certain culture. Religious memes – that is, thoughts, ideas, and behaviours that are connected to God and the supernatural – are spread in the same way from generation to generation in that authorities, such as parents, teachers, and religious officials such as priests and imams, pass them on to children and even to adults who are dependent upon these authorities. Through myths and rituals, the authorities convey ideas about the world, why it is shaped in this way, how a person should behave and act, what is right and wrong, etc.

Therefore, religion is irrational in its very nature. It is not built on a person's independent search for the truth, but on authorities prescribing what is the truth. This entails negative consequences, such as intellectual narrowness, discrimination against dissidents and dissent, and often also leads to violence. Dawkins is careful to point out that all religion, not just the extreme kinds, potentially can give rise to such unacceptable phenomena, and he quotes, Voltaire, who supposedly said: "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities" (Dawkins 2006, 306). Dawkins continues, saying:

As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers. The alternative, so transparent that it should need no urging, is to abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith. This is one reason why I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called "extremist" faith. The teachings of "moderate" religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism. (Dawkins 2006, 306)

Regardless of whether a person accepts the theory about the origin of religion in evolutionary side-effects, there are problems with Dawkins' view of religion. Both evolutionary biologists and scholars in various cultural disciplines have criticized Dawkins' theory about memes (Wilson 2007; Deacon 1999). Without going further into this discussion, it is enough to recall Hjärpe's comment that religious people do not unconditionally follow their leader's decrees. Furthermore, the connection between religion and extremism is by no means necessary, as Dawkins claims. "Moderate" religion cannot be viewed as an open invitation to extremism. Under certain circumstances, moderate religion can lead to extremism, as much of the rich flora of literature about "religious fundamentalism" shows, but it is also undoubtedly the case that non-extreme forms of religion often work to dampen extremist tendencies and help its followers interpret their faith in a manner that is less destructive for society. Moreover, non-religious ideologies have the same range of interpretations. One example is the plethora of political ideas inspired by the teachings of Karl Marx, where we encounter everything from parliamentary social democracy to communist dictatorship and extremist left wing terrorism. However, I totally agree with Dawkins that we must be able to criticize forms of religious behaviour that we feel do harm. Instead we should support and encourage those that are positive for society. All societies must do this. Here, a discussion about the concept of religion and religion's nature that takes into consideration all of its complexity and does not over-generalize, plays an important role. It is to such a discussion that I hope to contribute through this chapter.

Negative essentialism concerning individual religions is not common among scholars of religion. It is found mostly among believers who argue against other religious groups, or among groups who, for political reasons, want to condemn a certain religion. One example of the latter variant is description of Islam from right-wing extremists.

* * *

Like core-essentialism, negative and positive essentialism represent broad generalizations and simplifications. What we call religion or individual religions consist of phenomena that are too complex to be explained as good or as causing harm. Religions can be interpreted in different ways, and different aspects of the same religion can have varying functions in society and for individuals.

5. An alternative to essentialism: family resemblance and prototype

The American anthropologist Benson Saler argues for a way of viewing religion and individual religions that differs from the essentialist view. He states that, just like many other concepts we use without problem in daily life, “religion” is so ambiguous and amorphous that it is impossible to draw boundaries using a strict definition. Saler argues that the most natural starting point for a discussion about the concept of religion is the folk category religion, because we cannot get away from it no matter how much we might want to. When scholars of religion begin to study a culture with which they are unfamiliar, they have a starting point, which is their perception about religion with which they were raised. The researchers identify different phenomena in the new culture that are religious when these fit in with their inherited perception of religion. Saler argues: “In large measure, indeed, their scholarly efforts to define and characterize religion are efforts to refine and deepen the folk category they began to use as children, and to foreground what they deem most salient or important about religion” (Saler 2009, 173). Problems arise, however, when the folk category religion does not work, when it conflicts with other perceptions of religion; for example, ideas which assert that things that are not self-evidently included in the folk category are actually closely bound up with what we perceive as religion. In such situations the folk category must be questioned and discussed. In order for people with different understandings about what religion is and its role in society to be able to meet and co-operate, the analytical category of religion cannot be built solely on the Western folk category. Accordingly, Saler starts his book with the question of how we can transform a folk category into an analytical category that can facilitate cross-cultural research and understanding (Saler 2000, 1).

In contrast to a folk category, an analytic category is said to be one that can be used with greater precision to investigate, study, and assess different phenomena that are considered to fall into that category. As noted earlier, the greatest difficulty in creating analytic categories of such complicated phenomena as religion is that we can easily make them too small; we essentialize, or as Saler also puts it, *digitize* the concept of religion. By that, Saler means that we treat the category religion as if it were a binary category: either religion or non-religion; yes or no; 0 or 1 (Saler 2000, 12–13). The difficulty in essentializing religion is how to delimit the category. Saler writes:

The question of boundaries plagues all efforts to establish universal categories by monothetic definitions, whether the definitions be weighted toward functional considerations... or towards substantive ones. Ideal essentialist definitions would supply unambiguous, un-vague boundary-

creating and boundary-maintaining statements so that phenomena could be confidently sorted (digitized) into those that are covered by the definition and those that are not. (Saler 2000, 120)¹⁸

Saler suggests that, instead of essentialist definitions, we should work with religion as an *open* category that is defined by its centre rather than its boundaries. Where phenomena are located closer to the centre, they are deemed to be religion to a higher degree than phenomena that are far from the centre. One way of doing this, Saler says, is to proceed from the thought of *family resemblances* in combination with *prototype theory* when working with the concept of religion. The idea about family resemblances is especially associated with the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Wittgenstein stated that there are many concepts in our languages that designate phenomena in society which are so multi-faceted that they cannot be defined in a clear-cut way. He uses the concept of *games* as an example:

Consider, for example, the activities that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! ... And the upshot of these considerations is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small. (Wittgenstein 2009, I:66)

Wittgenstein goes on to state that the best way to characterize this sort of relationship between different elements is the concept of family resemblances. In the same way as games are different, no two members of a family are exactly the same as each other, although they often share certain traits: “build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family” (Wittgenstein 2009, I:67).

Saler suggests that when working analytically with the overall category of religion, we should view it as a pool of elements composed of such phenomena that we generally associate with religion, such as faith in transcendental beings, a moral code that is sanctioned by this faith, mythologies that describe origin and end of the world, rituals that refer to these mythologies, and so on. The specific examples we call religions (Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, etc.) take, to different extents, part of the elements in this pool. The religions are bound to each other through family similarities. This means that not every one of them needs to take part in every element of the pool, and no element needs to be present in all religions. However, they belong together through the complicated net of similarities that overlap and “crisscross,” as Wittgenstein put it. This way of reasoning can, of course, be applied to

¹⁸ Saler uses the concept of “monothetic definitions” more or less synonymously with “essentialist definitions”.

traditions within specific religions as well. Eva Hellman has provided an example of how Hinduism can be viewed as a family of traditions in this way (Hellman 2011, 125), and Saler argues that the idea that each individual religion composes a family of traditions can apply to all religions (Saler 2000, 208–209).

The question, then, is from where we get the elements in “the religion pool.” Saler was not the first to apply the theory of family similarities to religion, but he was the first to combine it with the so-called prototype theory, as it has been articulated within cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics (Saler 2000, Ch. 6). According to this theory, a prototype is the best or clearest example of members in a certain category. In order to illustrate what this means, when I teach, I often ask my students to come forward to the white board in the classroom and draw a bird or a fish. Almost every time I ask them to draw a bird, they draw something that looks very much like a sparrow or a warbler. I have never seen anyone draw an ostrich or a penguin. The same occurs if I ask them to draw a fish – what they draw is mostly similar to a dace or a perch, not an eel or a seahorse. The students know that ostriches and penguins are birds and that eels and seahorses are fish, but they are not equally *good examples* of the category to which they belong. A warbler or a house sparrow is among the most prototypical examples of the category bird for someone who grew up in Sweden, and a fish similar to a perch or dace is the most prototypical example of the category fish.

Within cognitive research, it is often argued that a large part of our thinking is based on prototypes, and that we are entirely dependent on them in order to be able to operate as rational beings (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 19). Our categories are formed through experiences we have during childhood and adolescence, and what counts as the most prototypical examples in a category are generally the most commonly occurring examples within that category—those that we have encountered most often during our lifetime. This also concerns the category of religion, and this is where the idea of folk categories comes into the picture. The folk category religion as it appears in Western Europe and North America has been built around the most prototypical examples in this category – those instances of religion that most people in these parts of the world have had the most experience with: Judaism, Christianity, and perhaps also Islam (even though each of these can show very different faces).¹⁹ It is in this prototypical religion that we find the elements that we include in the overall category religion (Saler 2000, 225–226). In prototype theory, together with the idea of

¹⁹ As, for instance, Eva Hellman shows, the concept of religion, as it is used today, is a typical Western phenomenon with strong ties to these religions, perhaps primarily to Christianity. (Hellman 2011)

family similarities, Saler asserts that we have the tools with which to transform a folk category into an analytical category.

The categories “birds” and “fish” are *bounded* categories; that is, we can, with relative certainty, delimit them by indicating which conditions should be fulfilled in order to belong to them. *Open* categories, on the other hand, have unclear boundaries and are not distinct from other categories. Many open categories are also graded; they have a centre of clear examples, while examples that are found further from the centre are not such good examples of members of the category. Saler states that we should view the category of religion as an open and graded category where, for example, Judaism composes a *more* prototypical example and where classic Theravada Buddhism, which in certain perspectives can be viewed as entirely free from transcendental elements, is a *less* prototypical example and sometimes is viewed as a life philosophy rather than a religion. An even more unclear case is Soviet communism, which in itself had many elements from the pool of religion but which lacked others. Was it a religion or not? For example, Soviet communism had rituals that in many ways were reminiscent of the Orthodox Church and historical writings that could be perceived as mythical. Where, in cases like this, is the boundary drawn between religion and other aspects of the culture, such as politics, economy, art, and sports? In a similar way this argument can be applied to boundaries between specific religions. When and where was a sect within the tradition we call Judaism transferred into what we call Christianity? Is the form of religion that we see evidence of in the epistle of James in the New Testament closer to Judaism than the Christianity that Paul represents? Or, to consider contemporary examples, are Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Jesus Christ’s Church of Latter Day Saints’ (the Mormons) movements within Christianity, or are they religions in their own right? According to Saler’s way of reasoning, it is not possible to give a clear answer to these questions. They must be discussed, and scholars of religion will probably not reach common positions on them. However, by presenting arguments and conclusions, it is possible in each context to show how the discussion has been conducted.

Saler is careful to point out that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not in themselves sufficient representatives of the analytical category of religion. They can, at best, represent a point of departure for reflection around what religion is. “As the most prototypical exemplars, the Western monotheisms are useful for purposes of reference, illustration and comparison. They do not, however, define our model” (Saler 2009, 179). With these three religions as a point of departure, the model, the religion pool, can be expanded and redefined. An example

of such a change is the study of so-called new religious movements. Not so long ago, it was considered inappropriate for a scholar of religion to study them. Today, the study of such movements provides important insights into how religions originate and develop. Furthermore, it is not possible, from a perspective of secular research about religion, to view prototypical Western religions as superior or more developed than others. They comprise the best starting point because the emergence of the Western concept of religion is, to a high degree, linked to them, and they therefore compose the most prototypical examples of religion.

6. The prototype as point of departure in instruction about religion

Doesn't the use of "our own" religions and "our" image of what religion is as a point of departure amount to a form of ethnocentrism? Saler admits that this is in fact the case, but he also states that it must be this way. When we attempt to learn something new, all we can do is to proceed from what is familiar to us. He writes, somewhat ironically:

In English – to indulge in a bit of ethnocentrism – we commonly say that we wish “to arrive at” understanding and knowledge, a phrasing that implies a journey. And journey, as I ethnocentrically understand it, involves a starting point. Ethnocentrism is not necessarily a fatal contaminant when we constitute a starting point, for it enables us initially to identify problems that we deem interesting, and it furnishes us start-up categories with which to embark on a journey towards greater understandings. (Saler 2000, 9)

The journey is a metaphor for learning, and a journey must have a starting point – in this case, our often rather ethnocentrically formed prototypical perception of religion. In the last chapter of his book *Conceptualizing Religion*, Saler discusses the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's concept of “distanciation” in relation to the ethnocentric starting points of scholars of religion. Saler discusses how distanciation from the familiar categories and the surroundings as well as from the “foreign” environments that are studied, becomes a tool with which to better understand and, in its academic context, be able to explain the worlds that have been investigated (Saler 2000, Ch. 7). This requires us to be conscious of the context from which we come and the pre-understanding we carry with us.

The Swedish pedagogue and historian of ideas Bernt Gustavsson offered a similar reasoning in his discussion of education in the book *Bildning i vår tid (Education in Our Time: About the Possibilities and Conditions of Education in Modern Society)* (Gustavsson 1996, 39–58).²⁰ Gustavsson proceeds from the idea that education is a journey, a departure

²⁰ Gustavsson has, however, a more pronounced hermeneutic perspective than Saler. The Swedish word “*bildning*” (German *Bildung*) is difficult to translate into English. It is more than just “education” and involves a

from the familiar, out into the world where the traveller has new experiences and makes new discoveries, and returns, changed but still the same. “The journey, the adventure, the departure and the homecoming are the most common metaphors of the idea of education [Sw. *bildning*]” (Gustavsson 1996, 39, my translation). We interpret the new and the foreign with the help of the ingrained and familiar and, in so doing, incorporate the unknown into our image of the world and transform it into something well-known. According to Gustavsson, the very rationale for education is this movement between the familiar and the unfamiliar; through becoming acquainted with the world, we get to know ourselves. The movement between the well-known and the unfamiliar is both individual and shared. “We interpret with the help of others through comparing and giving resistance to each other’s interpretations. Therefore, the dialogue, the conversation, is natural and foundational when it comes to education, knowledge and learning” (Gustavsson 1996, 43, my translation).

In Gustavsson’s book, education (Sw. *bildning*) in general stands at the centre, not instruction and the learning of individual subjects. The point of discussing Gustavsson here is that even instruction of specific subjects, such as religious education in school and religious studies in higher education, follows the same patterns. I do not mean that all instruction about religion must begin with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but that we who teach must proceed from the concepts of religion that most of our students have been socialized into, and that they generally use as the basis for their images of these religions. When we become conscious about our own pre-understandings, including essentialist approaches to religion that we might carry, we are given the opportunity to continue the journey that involves studying the complexity of ideas and behaviours that we call religion. Furthermore we will be able to provide our students with the map they need to embark on that journey themselves.

Finally: as I have indicated above, a non-essentialist perception of religion does not automatically involve ethical relativism. Maintaining that religion in general or a certain religion can be interpreted and expressed in different ways, is not the same thing as arguing that all of these interpretations and forms of expression are equally good for individuals or for society. Certain forms (such as authoritarian and oppressive forms) can be perceived as causing harm to individuals, and others (such as extreme and militant forms of Islam or Christianity) can even be dangerous. Of course, we have the right to dissociate ourselves from such kinds of religious expression. Such a position culminates in the question about which forms of religion we are prepared to allow in society today, and therefore in a discussion

moment of self-development as well as acquiring knowledge.

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about the concept of freedom of religion. This, however, is a subject that extends far beyond the scope of the present chapter.

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