The Concept of "Religion" as a Heuristic Device

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Introduction

It is common that a scholar will describe a culture using concepts not known by those being so described.[1] As many have noticed, this is often true of the use of the concept of "religion", a concept whose use as a cross-cultural taxon is relatively new. How should historians, anthropologists, theologians, and others understand the imposition of the concept "religion" on cultures that do not have that concept?

I have previously characterized the answers to this question as a choice between *realism* (the view that the concept is not merely part of the observer's perspective but also refers to a social reality operating in the world) and *nonrealism* (the view that the concept is merely part of the observer's perspective and does not also refer to a social reality operating in the world).[2] One finds debates between realists and nonrealists in the natural sciences

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2. Nongbri points out that I have used "nonrealist" and "antirealist" interchangeably. See Brent Nongbri, "Imagining Science: Ancient Religion, Modern Science, and How We Talk About History", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024), 200, https://doi.org/10.51619/stk.v100i3.26535. A useful distinction between them, however, is that a "nonrealist" is someone who holds that the discourse in question does not refer to something that exists independent of that discourse, and an "antirealist" is a nonrealist who also explicitly argues against the view that it exists in that realist way.

and in other inquiries in which people use theoretical tools to represent some aspect of the world,[3] and I contend that the same debates arise in the humanities and the social sciences. In the past, I defended a realist position regarding "religion", and I have categorized Brent Nongbri's work as representative of the nonrealist camp.[4] In his response, Nongbri says not only that the nonrealist label does not fit his work but that the realist/nonrealist debate is not very helpful in general, given that answering the ontological question about the nature of things has little impact on how scientists and other scholars actually work.[5]

I understand my argument that "religion" refers to transhistorical or transcultural realities as part of what one might call "a materialist account" of human behaviour. On a materialist account, human beings live in a world, much of which they may have only recently discovered and named. On such an account, human behaviour is shaped not only by entities outside our bodies (such as the planet's lithosphere) and by entities inside our bodies (such as leukocytes in our blood), but also by social and cultural entities. Towards the goal of understanding and explaining the material structures that operate in societies and cultures, I think that the academic study of religion is best served by a realist social ontology of religion. My argument for realism does not depend on any particular definition of "religion". However, I judge that the academic study of religion is best served by a polythetic or family resemblance definition of "religion" that reflects the fact that religions are so heterogeneous.[6]

In this paper, I seek to explain what I take to be the best way to understand the status of concepts used in the academic study of religion. The first three sections of the paper seek to clarify the different positions on this question, the distinctiveness of the heuristic position that Nongbri defends, and the reasons why someone who is a realist might nevertheless agree with

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3. For a short and clear introduction to these debates, see Anjan Chakravartty, "Scientific Realism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 12 June 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/scientific-realism/.

4. Kevin Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity: A How To", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 59–78, https://doi.org/10.1558/equinox.27964.

5. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", especially 208–220.

6. I first proposed a multi-component definition, but that definition was still monothetic. Kevin Schilbrack, "What *Isn't* Religion?", *The Journal of Religion* 93 (2013), 291–318, https://doi.org/10.1086/670276. For an explanation why a polythetic definition is better, see Kevin Schilbrack, "Mathematics and the Definitions of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 83 (2018), 145-160, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-017-9621-6. For a comparison of my "anchored" polythetic definition to other polythetic approaches, see Kevin Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 March 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-religion/.

critics in resisting the use of the term "religion". The following three sections then defend the realist position by showing the costs of the heuristic view, the soundness of the realist view, and a discussion of how the realist view is consonant with the insights of three figures to whom Nongbri appeals for support, namely, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017), and Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976).

The Three Positions at Issue

Increasingly over the past decades, scholars have been making a reflexive turn, that is, a shift of attention to examine the concepts that have shaped their academic disciplines. One sees this reflexive turn throughout the university as scholars look in the mirror, so to speak, and ask how the concepts of "art", "society", "culture", "science", "politics", "law", "history", and so on have been socially constructed, by whom, in what context.[7] Let us use the name "the critical study of 'religion'" for the reflexive turn in the academic study of religion.[8] The critical study of "religion" has shown that it is only in the last few hundred years – only as modern European colonial empires appeared – that the term "religion" came to be used to name social practices around the world predicated on beliefs about supernatural entities. Given this realization, many of those making the reflexive turn have drawn the conclusion that the concept of "religion" is a part of the modern Western imagination that does not refer to something real outside that sphere. I call that position "nonrealism". A nonrealist scholar holds that the concept of "religion" has been imposed on non-Western cultures and on pre-modern history, but there was no such form of life that actually existed in those times and places. The reflexive turn is an important part of any academic discipline. Nevertheless, I have argued that the socially constructed nature of the concept of "religion", its provenance in Christian discourse, and its colonialist uses to denigrate and manage indigenous peoples do not undermine the ability of that concept to refer to real social structures, even where the concept was not known. I hold that "religion" is not restricted to the modern West but can also refer to forms of life that existed in pre-modern history and in non-Western cultures. For this reason, I argue that we should

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7. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm describes what he calls "concepts in disintegration" throughout the academy in his *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, Chicago 2021, 49–84, 303–306.

8. I prefer this to the commonly used label "critical religion", which seems open to misunderstanding. The use of the term "critical" for the reflexive turn, though apt, should not be confused with the use of the term "critical" in Enlightenment, Kantian, or Frankfurt School senses. See Kevin Schilbrack, "Do You Practice the Critical Study of Religion?", *Religion* 54 (2024), https://doi.org./10.1080/0048721X.2024.2388436.

recognize two positions in the critical study of "religion": a critical nonrealism and a critical realism.[9]

"Critical realism" is a label adopted by different positions, including theological positions,[10] and so I want to specify the sense in which I am using it. The critical realism on which I draw is a position in philosophy of science, originally developed by Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014), that recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge without giving up the view that one's knowledge is "transitive", which is to say, that it is *of* something whose existence is independent of one's inquiry into it.[11] Bhaskar argues that what is real is not exhausted by what human beings have conceptualized. An inquiry in, say, chemistry or anthropology requires concepts invented by human beings, but it does not follow that that inquiry is not into realities whose existence precedes those concepts. A critical realist approach to the concept of "religion", then, seeks to combine an appreciation of the deconstructive, genealogical, and postcolonial analyses of the concept with the insistence that the concept enables one to grasp, even if always incompletely, structures in the world not generated by our inquiry into them.[12] Thus, even though the concept of "religion" has a history, even though the concept has been weaponized, and even though different scholars define the term in different ways, it does not follow that the term is illusory, refers to nothing, or has no analytic value. The referential use of "religion" is not special in this respect: theoretical terms in general have the capacity to point to real things in the world. I think that the inquiries pursued in the academic study of religion – and in the humanities and social sciences generally – are best understood within this critical realist frame.

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9. Kevin Schilbrack, "A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon", *Critical Research on Religion* 8 (2020), 87–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303219900229.

10. There are several Christian theologians who have adopted critical realism, though in some cases, they draw from the "critical realism" of Roy Wood Sellars (1880–1973) or Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) rather than that of Roy Bhaskar. Perhaps the best known is Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: 2. Reality*, Edinburgh 2002. For an example of a Bhaskarian critical realist who seeks to show the value of this approach to Christian theology, see Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, London 2013.

11. Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London 2008; Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 4th ed., London 2015.

12. The best critical realist account of religion so far is that of Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*, Princeton, NJ 2017, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400887989. For an overview of Smith's account by a scholar working outside critical realism, see Michael Stausberg, "Real Religion from the Person Up: On Christian Smith, *Religion* (2017)", in Michael Stausberg (ed.), *21st Century Theories of Religion*, London 2024, 201–221.

Nongbri writes that my use of the realism/nonrealism distinction is not helpful. I do not agree, but Nongbri is right that there are more than two positions on the relation of discourse and reality, and a simple realism/nonrealism dichotomy can hide this. Moreover, the position that Nongbri defends is not simply the opposite of my realism. To see how his proposal differs, it helps to distinguish between how one answers two questions: (1) the ontological question about whether religions have existed where the concept was not known and (2) the linguistic question about whether scholars should continue to use the term "religion". My critical realist "yes/yes" answer is that (1) religions have existed in cultures even where the concept was not known, and therefore (2) scholars can legitimately use the concept of "religion" when studying those cultures. The opposing "no/no" answer disagrees on both points, holding that (1) religions did not exist where the concept was not known, and therefore (2) scholars should not use the concept of "religion" when studying them. Nongbri's proposal is not identical to either view. He proposes that (1) religions did not exist where the concept was not known, but (2) scholars can use the concept of "religion" when studying them. He holds, in effect, a "no/yes" position. Given that Nongbri gives a "no" answer to the ontological question, his view is also a nonrealist position, and my use of that label for his project still seems to me fitting.[13] Nevertheless, his proposal is distinct from the "no/no" position that argues

13. Galen Watts and Sharday Mosurinjohn have questioned my use of the term "nonrealism", arguing that those on whom I use it "would, when push comes to shove, generally accept Schilbrack's claim that [forms of life] are social constructions, or 'social facts', as Durkheim would say, that have a degree of internal consistency". Watts and Mosurinjohn are suggesting that my opponents actually agree with me about the ontological question that there have been forms of life in many cultures that weave together beliefs, practices, and social roles predicated on the existence of superempirical beings, disagreeing with me only about the linguistic question "whether it is appropriate to classify these various social facts under the general label *religion*". Galen Watts & Sharday Mosurinjohn, "Can Critical Religion Play by Its Own Rules? Why There Must Be More Ways to Be Critical in the Study of Religion", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90 (2022), 326–327, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac045. If a scholar answered yes to the ontological question, but did not want to use the term "religion" for this form of life because its participants lack the concept, then I would agree with Watts and Mosurinjohn that "nonrealist" would be a poor label for such a position. Edward Polanco's account of Nahua culture, described below, is like this. There may be a better word for religion-like forms of life. However, some critical scholars of "religion", including Nongbri, McCutcheon, and Daniel Dubuisson, propose that the term "religion" is inappropriate because, ontologically speaking, outside the influence of the modern west, there existed no such forms of life or social facts. See Russell T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.*, Berlin 2018, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110560831; Daniel Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religions*, Sheffield 2019. These critics propose that the illusion of religion is the result of those who have cobbled together unconnected elements to create the appearance that these cultures had a religion-like form of life. As Nongbri puts it, "it is not a matter of finding 'a better word for it'. The very problem is that there never was any 'it' there to begin with". Brent Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope", *Numen* 55 (2008), 456. The term "nonrealist" seems a good way to name that position.

that scholars should drop the concept of "religion", what I have elsewhere called the abolitionist answer.[14] Nongbri's proposal is that even though religions did not exist in cultures that lack the concept, one can use this concept to redescribe them. Let us call this "no/yes" position "the heuristic view".

The Heuristic View

What I am calling the heuristic view represents an important stance taken in many fields today. When scholars study the natural or social world, they develop theories, models, and maps. The heuristic view holds that one can use these conceptual devices without claiming that they accurately describe real entities in the world. The heuristic view is thus part of a family of positions, often drawing on important critiques of the correspondence theory of truth and representationalist accounts of the mind, that seek to drop *agreement with reality* as a necessary part of our understanding of how theorizing works. For example, the heuristic view resembles instrumentalist philosophies of science, which interpret entities described in theories as simply instruments for the prediction of human experiences. It also resembles pragmatist accounts that treat the truth of a theory as equivalent to whether it works, that is, to its practical value. And it resembles Hans Vaihinger's (1852–1933) Kantian-inspired "as if" philosophy, according to which human beings construct explanations to help them navigate life and treat the entities in those explanations as if they were real.[15] Critical realism distinguishes two sides for any inquiry, an epistemic side that concerns whether the inquiry produces credible results and an ontic side that concerns what is real. The family of nonrealist positions mentioned here, including the heuristic view, reject this distinction, either by dropping the ontic side as inaccessible or by collapsing it into the epistemic side.

I have said that Nongbri's heuristic view is a "no/yes" position according to which (1) religions did not exist in cultures where the concept was not known, but (2) scholars can use the concept of "religion" when studying those cultures. Nongbri is clear about the "no" side of his position, what I am calling his nonrealism: in his widely cited *Before Religion*, he writes that one of the goals of the book is to dispel the commonly held notion that any religions existed before modernity.[16] In a concise statement of the heuristic view, Nongbri says that scholars redescribing cultures outside the sphere of

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14. Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010), 1112–1138, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq086.

15. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, New York 1924.

16. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT 2013, 8, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001.

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western modernity may use the term "religion", but if they do so, they must always avoid giving the impression that religion was really there.[17] He maintains this nonrealist view in the paper in this present special issue, arguing that my attempt to claim that "religion" can refer to real entities in antiquity is "counterproductive".[18] As he puts his view, one need only treat one's scholarly redescriptions "*as if* they represent reality [...] *as if* they are real".[19] Here, Nongbri follows Russell T. McCutcheon, who wrote that scholars are committed only to "talking *as if* there are such things in the world as religions, acting *as if* there are such things in the world as religions, and organizing *as if* there are such things in the world as religions".[20] Nongbri is equally clear about the "yes" side of his position: even though religion did not exist outside the modern West, "we may nevertheless *want* to discuss the various practices and beliefs that *modern* people tend to group together as religion, to the degree that we find these individual practices and beliefs in these ancient sources".[21]

There are situations that should motivate even realists to adopt a heuristic view. One such situation is when one's theory, model, or map concerns entities that one cannot observe even with technological help. In situations like this, one can put one's theory forward as a heuristic device, and, as long as the theory is not confirmed, one can continue to use the theory without knowing whether or claiming that the account of the world that it provides is accurate. For the realist, however, this uncorroborated status is not the nature of all theories, let alone all discourse, but rather an in-principle temporary situation that can end if the theory gets confirmed. Another situation that should motivate one to adopt the heuristic view is when one deliberately creates a model that does not correspond to any structure in the world, for example, when one divides a class into a "blue team" and a "red team". In situations like this, one's categories are simply sorting devices that do not reflect any reality about the two teams (though, once invented, the two categories may become social structures having effects on the class). Racial categories may be heuristic in this sense, that is, invented to serve the interests of those who created them but corresponding to no biological structure. In situations like these two, a heuristic device is a valuable tool.

For the critical realist, the problems arise when the heuristic recalcitrance about agreement with reality is taken as a view of human knowledge in general. There is nothing problematic about holding that a particular theory is a

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17. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 158.
18. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205.
19. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 218–219. Italics in original.
20. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 112. Italics in original. See also pp. 11–12.
21. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201. Italics in original.

heuristic device and that we do not know whether it accurately maps structures in the world. But realists resist the exaggeration that *all* claims about the world are merely heuristic devices, that human beings cannot know whether *any* claims agree with reality. Those who adopt this Kantian-style view create an epistemological rule for all human knowledge. They drop the notion that one can compare a theory to reality; the world becomes noumenal and "well lost".[22] The reasons often given to justify this epistemological rule, however, fail to do so. For example, nonrealists often point to the fact that all human theorizing is fallible: what people take as true may turn out to be false. Similarly, nonrealists often point to the fact that all human theorizing is perspectival: what people take as true often depends on certain tools or commitments that others lack. However, these truths do not entail that one cannot sort the theories, models, and maps that do and do not describe real entities in the world. Rather, they entail that one should adopt a fallible and perspectival realism.[23] I return to this idea below.

One last point. Nongbri sometimes writes as if scholars should adopt the heuristic view once they recognize that their work is *redescriptive*. That is, when scholars recognize that they are using concepts that do not exist in a given culture, they should adopt the view that their scholarship does not name realities operating there. But this does not follow. Nongbri is right that it is important to distinguish between descriptive uses of a concept to refer to ways that people understand themselves and redescriptive uses when scholars apply that concept to people who do not use it to understand themselves. As Nongbri says, redescriptive accounts are "an imposition" on the evidence.[24] Marking this descriptive/redescriptive distinction in religious studies is especially significant for historians, to underline the fact that the concept of "religion" is not found in the Christian New Testament, the Jewish Tanakh, the Buddhist Tripitaka, the Hindu Vedas, or other ancient sources, and for post-colonial scholars, to underline the fact that before contact with the West, the concept was not found in Japan, India, Nigeria, Mexico, and other non-Western cultures. The nonrealist inference

22. Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost", *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972), 649–665, https://doi.org/10.2307/2025059.

23. See, for example, Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism*, Chicago 2006; Michela Massimi, *Perspectival Realism*, Oxford 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197555620.001.0001. For an insightful discussion of the human tendency to take one's map as the reality it describes, I recommend Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther, *When Maps Become the World*, Chicago 2020. Winther shares Nongbri's concerns about what Winther calls the "pernicious reification" of one's models of the world. However, it is worth noting that Winther's proposed solution is not to treat theories, models, and maps as heuristic devices but instead a position he calls "contextual objectivity", analogous to the perspectival realism I recommend in this paper.

24. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202.

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here is that when a culture lacks the concept of "religion", it must not have religion. But the fact that some people do not have a concept for X does not imply that X is not there. The fact of redescription is no stumbling block for realism.[25] Redescriptive terms are simply etic terms and, though they are "imposed", they may yet name something real. The central question about the redescriptive use of "religion" is this: when scholars redescribe a culture using "religion", are they redescribing that culture accurately? Showing that the term is being used redescriptively does not answer that question.

Resisting the Concept of "Religion"

As a *critical* realist, I recognize the benefits of making the reflexive turn to examine the concepts with which we work. One benefit is that it helps us recognize the effects that our concepts have on the world. Although we speak of "labelling" a form of life as a religion, the term is not an inert sticker like a price tag stuck to an apple. Using this term shapes how the form of life comes to be treated. In this respect, one can compare "religion" to other recently invented and politically charged terms, such as "sexual harassment" and "genocide". The realist position is that concepts such as these can name a social reality that existed before the concept was invented, but it is important for realists to remember that these concepts were developed to do something. The concepts are part of how their users manage the world. These concepts open a door for perceptual practices – and legal practices – that had not existed before. Moreover, these concepts can have looping effects when those so described who had not understood themselves in terms of a category then learn of it and change their behaviour, either to avoid the negative effects of the concept or to profit from the positive ones.

In fact, as a critical realist, I recognize the value not only of making the reflexive turn to examine the history and political uses of the concept of "religion", but also of resisting that concept. Even when one works with a polythetic definition of "religion" with its flexible and changing set of properties, "religion" nevertheless takes Christianity as its prototypical instance, and it therefore carries an aura of meanings that can distort the study of forms of life in different cultures. In addition, the category "religion", like every category, can have a flattening effect that hides real differences from view and reinscribes an understanding of the world that serves particular interests. It can therefore be an invaluable pedagogical practice to disrupt these effects by resisting the use of the English word. Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin do this by leaving the Latin *religio* and the Greek *thrēskeia*

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25. In fact, before Nongbri's first book, I explicitly argued for this very same distinction between "describing" a culture in indigenous terms and "redescribing" it in terms that its members did not know. Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", 1122.

untranslated, and this is an effective way to trip up the reader's unreflective assumption that, given the examples of religion in their lives, they already know what ancient forms of life must have been like.[26] For another example, Edward Polanco steers clear of the term "religion" in his analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Nahua healing practices.[27] To avoid the assumption that a religion is about one's faith, Polanco writes instead of Nahua "devotional practices". To avoid the assumption that a God has a name and a personality, he writes instead of "life forces". To avoid the assumption that a ritual follows a rote script, Polanco writes instead of "ceremony". Putting these concepts together, a phrase such as "ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices" helps English-speakers grasp Nahua culture while avoiding the common assumptions that if the Nahua had "a religion", then it must have doctrines, it must be something that practitioners chose to join, it must be separate from politics, and so on. In fact, think how pedagogically illuminating it could be to *reverse* this labelling practice and to redescribe Christianity, for example, as ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices. With the same logic, one might use sorting categories from non-Christian contexts (such as the Sanskrit *dharma*, the Arabic *dīn*, and the Chinese *dao*) as terms to capture social patterns operating in the modern West.

As a critical *realist*, however, I hold that the pedagogical question whether avoiding the term is pedagogically useful is distinct from the ontological question whether "religion" names something real. Whether the term "religion" refers to a social structure operating in a given culture depends on only two things: how one defines the term and the way that the practitioners of that culture organize themselves. For this reason, if one were stipulatively to define "religion" to mean *ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices*, then "religion" would name real social structures operating in Nahua culture. In fact, under that definition, "religion" would also name real social structures operating in other cultures where the term was not known. Given this Polanco-inspired definition, "religion" is not simply a heuristic device that exists in our minds that does not name real social structures operating in the world, but is instead a redescriptive category with transhistorical and transcultural application. In fact, this is exactly how Polanco uses "settler colonialism", another term that, like

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26. Carlin A. Barton & Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, New York 2016.

27. Edward Anthony Polanco, *Healing Like Our Ancestors: The Nahua Tiçitl, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Central Mexico, 1535–1660*, Tucson, AZ 2024.

"sexual harassment" and "genocide", names real social structures in multiple cultures, even when the term was not known.

It may seem that the realist/nonrealist debate is about whether "religion" names something that existed in times and places outside Western modernity, but this is not exactly correct. It is important to move this debate about the term "religion" below the verbal level, and this is why the often disparaged practice of defining religion is so important. The truth is that Nongbri's nonrealist argument depends not simply on the word "religion", but also on a particular understanding of religion that he builds into his case. Nongbri understands "a religion" to refer to a set of social practices that (1) are predicated on beliefs about supernatural entities and (2) have been disentangled from the political, economic, artistic, and other aspects of that culture.[28] By including this second property, Nongbri builds into his understanding of "religion" the post-Westphalian separation of church and state that we see, for instance, in the Constitution of the United States. This is why he says it is impossible for a religion to permeate a culture.[29] Given this understanding of the contested term, one can see that Nongbri's argument is not exactly that religion did not exist outside modernity but that religion in its modern form did not exist outside modernity. It is hard to deny that tautology. However, when one understands "religion" with my polythetic definition, or with the Polanco-inspired definition above, or with just about any scholarly definition, the social structures being described can be found outside the modern West.

The Costs of Adopting the Heuristic Position

I think that unless a scholar's work refers to things that exist independent of one's inquiry into them, one cannot describe one's theory of those things as "accurate" or "true". These terms of praise presuppose the possibility of agreement with reality. I once put this point in a way that I hoped would be arresting, and so I am glad that Nongbri quotes it: I wrote that "unless one commits to speaking of real structures in the society, that is, structures that

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28. In his book, Nongbri treats religion as a "discrete sphere", explicitly separated from nonreligious parts of a culture by the practitioners themselves. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 1, 4. In the article in this special issue, he again speaks of "the isolation of religion as a sphere of life that is ideally distinct from other areas, like science, international relations, law, and so on, [that is,] distinguished from other, secular aspects of life". Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201. This modern separation of cultural spheres did not exist in antiquity, and Nongbri assumes this modern separation as part of his definition of "religion". For other nonrealists assuming a definition of "religion" that automatically restricts the term to the modern world, see Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion".

29. Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion", 440-460.

operate independent of one's labels, one cannot argue that one's redescription of it is illuminating, explanatory, accurate, or true".[30]

These four adjectives capture different aspects of scholarship. For example, to claim that one's scholarship is "illuminating" uses the metaphor of shining a light on something "out there", that is, something independent of the light. This metaphor opposes the claim that historians simply manufacture or fabricate the past, that writing history is simply a project of invention or fiction.[31] To claim that one's scholarship is "explanatory", however, is to say not only that it illuminates the entity being investigated but also that it identifies the causal mechanisms that brought it about. It is not necessary for the study of religion to take up explanatory questions, but seeking explanations is central to any reductive approach. The terms "accurate" and "true" are, then, terms of praise that mean that one's allegedly illuminating or explanatory claims successfully capture the way things are.

When I wrote that statement, I thought that my opponents would object. I thought that they would insist that their scholarship *was* illuminating, explanatory, accurate, or true – perhaps not in the realist sense of referring to entities in the world, but perhaps in some alternative sense. I have been surprised when they agree with me. Russell T. McCutcheon, for example, argues that no account of the past can be said to be "any more accurate than any other"; rival historical accounts are "all on a par".[32] Arguing that there is no way to compare one's concepts to an unconceptualized world, McCutcheon also recommends that scholars drop the idea that some redescriptions can "distort" the nature of things or be "flawed". In fact, McCutcheon once criticized Nongbri for implying that there could be more or less distorting accounts of the past,[33] and Nongbri now seems to have repudiated that hint of realism. As Nongbri says, "I would not say that any redescription is (or could be) explanatory, accurate, or true". He also wants to avoid saying that some claims about the past are "fitting".[34] McCutcheon and Nongbri are here tracing out the implication of the nonrealist view,

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30. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 66.

31. The verbs "manufacturing" and "fabricating" come from Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York 1997, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105032.001.0001; McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*. McCutcheon explains that he picked the term "fabricating" for what social construction involves precisely because it implies lying. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 3–4, 9, 42. McCutcheon's departmental colleague Vaia Touna has also adopted the view that historians do not discover facts but instead fabricate the past. Vaia Touna, *Fabrications of the Greek Past: Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*, Leiden 2017, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004348615.

32. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 39–40.

33. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 19.

34. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202–203.

namely, unless one can compare one's theories to entities in the world, one has to drop the notions of distortion and fit, accuracy and truth. Given how central these ideas are to most forms of inquiry, I consider this a cost of the heuristic view.

Although I previously treated these four adjectives as a set, the notion that some scholarship can be *explanatory* differs from the other terms. An explanatory inquiry seeks the causes of an event, and it often involves an account not only of what one can see, but also of mechanisms that are unobserved or even unobservable. For example, Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) hypothesized a biological mechanism that would explain the inheritance of traits. He argued that this mechanism must be assembled of parts that come in pairs, one from each parent, though at that time no one had yet seen chromosomes or DNA, which were not discovered until decades later. It is common that an explanatory inquiry depends on reference to an as-yet-unknown reality. It therefore makes perfect sense that those who drop agreement with reality from their understanding of theories, models, and maps would also drop finding explanations as a goal of inquiry. It is true that a historian can give an account of the past that includes no causal explanations. But this is a truncated understanding of what one can do, and so I consider this a second cost of the heuristic view.

If a heuristic view of religion in antiquity does not seek to be accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, what exactly is its value? Nongbri proposes that even when one does not claim that one's account can have these goals, "redescriptions can be illuminating without being characterized by any of those other terms". Being illuminating, he explains, is meant in the sense of thinking "in a clearer way", but not in the sense of coming closer to the truth.[35] Merely being "illuminating" or "clearer" strikes me as a chastened goal for a historian. But how can one's claims about history be illuminating or clearer without being accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting? To be sure, that possibility exists for those who do *not* take the heuristic view. For example, given my definition, "religion" refers to forms of life composed of multiple elements such as belief in a superempirical reality, ethical norms, rites of passage, a text considered sacred, and creation narratives. It might be illuminating to use the term "religion" to redescribe a form of life in a culture that lacked religion, if that form of life were composed of only some of those elements (say, ethical norms, rites of passage, and a text considered sacred). This heuristic use of "religion" would be illuminating, however, only to the extent that it is accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting to say that this culture really has those elements. The phrase "form of life" comes from

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35. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 203. See also Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 153.

Wittgenstein and "rites of passage" from Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957); these are modern Western concepts that may not exist in the cultures being redescribed with them. If one resists the realist account and takes the heuristic view towards these elements, then one has to ask why *they* are illuminating. In the end, it seems that heuristic devices can be suggestive, they can stimulate thought, and they can generate new ways of seeing. But unless those new ways of seeing are accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, we do not yet have a sense how they can be illuminating or clearer. Like the claim that some scholarship can be "less distorting", which, on reflection, Nongbri gave up, it seems that scholarship that eliminates the notion of agreement with reality has to drop the adjectives "illuminating" and "clearer" as well.

The difference between the heuristic ("no/yes") and the abolitionist ("no/no") views is that the latter argues that one should cease using the term "religion" for cultures outside the modern West. As abolitionist Timothy Fitzgerald says in his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, dozens of times, the term "religion" "has no analytic value".[36] Fitzgerald does not unpack this concept, but, typically, to "analyze" something is to break it down into its constituent elements. To say that the concept of "religion" has analytic value outside the modern West, then, means that when one dissects some cultural entity, one finds a religious element. This is my realist view: when one analyzes the political legitimation of the Mandate of Heaven, the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, the hallucinogen use by Amazonian shamans, the crowning of Charlemagne (748–814) by Pope Leo III (c. 750–816), the explanation of caste in the Rig Veda, or the meditation on kōans by Zen monks, one finds a religious element in each case, because these ideologies, events, and practices were connected by the participants to their beliefs about a superempirical entity. It is precisely this analysis that Fitzgerald rejects. As Fitzgerald says in a nice statement of both sides of his "no/no" position: "Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life".[37] Nongbri, however, repeatedly says that on the heuristic view "religion" *does* have analytic value.[38] His proposed heuristic view permits scholars to use the term "religion", but it is not clear how, without speaking of real structures in society, the term can have analytic value. The heuristic view is that when one analyzes ideologies, events, and practices outside the modern West, one does *not* find religion. Precisely because the

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36. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford 2000.
37. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 4.
38. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201–202.

heuristic view denies the ontological claim that religion exists in these cultures, I think that those who adopt this view have to give up not only the claim that the use of "religion" outside the modern West is accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, but also that it has analytic value.

Clarifying the Realist Position

In the previous section, I argue that the heuristic view comes with some significant costs. In his paper in the current special issue, Nongbri returns the favour and argues that my critical realism also comes with problematic implications. In this section, I want to consider three of these objections. My hope is that as I defuse each one, the realist position becomes more and more persuasive.

The most significant objection Nongbri makes is that the realist position implies that one has "direct access" to the world, that is, access to the world not mediated by our concepts.[39] I do not base my realist social ontology on any concept-free access. In fact, the "critical" aspect of critical realism is thoroughly conceptual. Nevertheless, Nongbri thinks that he sees such access implied in my use of the phrase "the molecule itself", which resembles "the thing-in-itself", Kant's name for inaccessible noumenal we-know-not-what.[40] He also thinks that he sees direct access implied in my distinction between things whose existence depends on human intentions (such as money and nations) and things that have existed independent of human intentions (such as mountains and amino acids). Making such a distinction is problematic, he proposes, since both what we call "money" and what we call "mountains" depend for their existence on human intentions, namely, the intentions involved in conceptually carving the entity out from the rest of reality.

The relation between mental concepts and material realities is an important one. Nongbri is right that if the critical realism position requires that we are able to step out of our discursive practices to know things as they are "in themselves", then this position would not be plausible. Nongbri recognizes that critical realism treats human knowledge as a social construction, but he suggests that critical realists have not realized that recognizing the linguistically mediated character of knowledge "troubles the whole idea" that human beings can ever refer to real things in the world.[41]

This objection reflects a Kantian worry that to know whether one's claims agree with reality requires knowledge about an unconceptualized or

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39. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202–203, 208.
40. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 207–208.
41. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 208.

noumenal realm to which no one has access. To alleviate this worry, realists should be clear that by agreement with reality, they mean checking one's theories, models, and maps against entities in the phenomenal world. Consider this ordinary example. The GPS map in my car is out-of-date, and it therefore sometimes gives me bad directions. For example, its map does not include the new entrance to the airport, and I can therefore find myself driving with dozens of other cars through the six-lane entrance, beneath the giant sign for the airport, on a road that the GPS says does not exist. Because the GPS map has not been updated, it does not take into account the construction that has been recently done to the highway. It does not agree with reality. Knowing this, I treat with caution the directions my GPS gives me. As this example illustrates, the distinction that realists make between agreeing and disagreeing with reality is adjudicated by reference not to noumena but solely to this-worldly entities. The realist claim is that, *within* our experiences, we distinguish between accurate and inaccurate claims; *within* our discourses, we distinguish between things that do and do not depend for their existence on human effort. It is actually the nonrealist position that identifies reality with unconceptualized or noumenal entities. When one thinks that "reality" refers to those entities, one ends up with the idea that reality is perpetually out of our experiential and discursive reach. When one thinks that reality is inaccessible, one ends up treating the GPS assertion that *there is no entrance to the airport here* and my perception that *there is an entrance to the airport here* as if they are on a par.

A second objection has to do with the nature of a complex entity like a religion. Nongbri writes that I do not care whether the rituals, scriptures, institutions, experiences, doctrines, and other cultural elements called "a religion" are actually connected to each other:

> Schilbrack argues that the simple *existence* in ancient sources of the various practices and beliefs encompassed by modern definitions of religion is sufficient to say that religion existed in that culture, even absent any evidence of internal connection between these practices and beliefs in the sources themselves.[42]

This objection is easy to answer, because I have consistently insisted that to be a religion, the practices, beliefs, institutions, and other components that constitute a form of life have to be connected by the sources themselves: "the elements that make up a religion [must be] kin to each other, taught

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42. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 204.

by the participants as an interconnected complex.”[43] In fact, I have argued that if the elements were not connected by the participants but merely by the scholar, then the abolitionists would be right that we should drop the term “religion”.

It is important to see that the claim that the cultural elements called “a religion” are not connected by the participants – that connections between them are invented by contemporary Westerners – is precisely the nonrealist view. The realist claim is that despite the lack of the word “religion”, there is a form, unity, or structure into which these elements are woven together, and the nonrealist position denies the existence of this form. For example, Daniel Dubuisson argues that Western scholars, shaped by Christian assumptions, have “religion” as a template in their minds, and they then look for those elements in other cultures and combine them to create the illusion that these elements have some connection to each other. As Dubuisson puts it, “the fact that it may be possible to find elsewhere, in other cultures and in an isolated state, one or other element that is comparable to one of those contained in the Western system in no way authorizes us to infer the existence of the structure itself”.[44] Russell T. McCutcheon speaks of the invention of Buddhism in the same way:

> Armed with the category religion, social actors were able to invent a seemingly coherent thing called Buddhism (which was then thought to have a history and to be a causal agent) from what might have been a disparate – and thus rather differently organized and identified – collection of prior claims, actions, artifacts, and institutions.[45]

Nongbri presses this same argument:

> my point is to stress that *we as historians* group these together as “religion” and this *act of grouping* is a result of our own peculiar set of interests and not intrinsic to the ancient sources. [...] If it is *we* historians who are picking out this-and-not-that from ancient sources in order to discuss “ancient religions”, then it is *we* who are generating (not “discovering”) the “ancient religion” in question. It is exactly this *bundling* of some sets of beliefs and practices in our sources and not others, this *classification*, that is the issue.[46]

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43. Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?”, 1124–1125.
44. Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, Baltimore, MD 2003, 13.
45. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 22.
46. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 5. Italics in original. See also p. 22.

It is for this same reason that Nongbri uses the word "impose" when he argues that pre-modern people have religions only insofar as anthropologists impose their own framework on them.[47] The realist hypothesis is that these threads of connection are present in the culture that is being redescribed; the nonrealist hypothesis is that it is the observer that creates these connections.

This realist/nonrealist disagreement about cultural connections is an especially fruitful one because it turns on an empirical question. Most scholars today understand religion as a system, complex, or network of parts. To take a well-known example, Ninian Smart (1927–2001) claimed that one often finds an "anatomy" of practice-ritual, experiential-emotional, narrative-mythical, doctrinal-philosophical, ethical-legal, social-institutional, and material-artistic elements.[48] The realist claim is that cultural elements like these are linked by the practitioners themselves and thereby create a form of life. The chanting of sutras by monks as a practice, the monastery as an institution, the "basket" of sutras as a collection of texts, the charity of laypeople whose donations sustain the monks as a virtue, the arguments that there is no self as a philosophy – the realist claim is that these elements are connected to each other by the participants and, needing a name for this social complex, one can call it "a religion". The nonrealist claim is that the participants themselves do not see any connection between the chanting, the monasteries, the sutras, the charity, and philosophical arguments, and these elements are linked only in the minds of those influenced by the concept of "religion".[49] To be sure, the answer to the empirical question whether cultural elements like these refer to, presuppose, or justify each other to form a cultural complex will vary from one context to another. But to the extent that one finds such connections in the sources themselves, one undermines the nonrealist claim that no such forms exist outside the modern West.

The third objection has to do with my use of the terms "transhistorical" and "transcultural". I use these terms to argue that "religion" names a pattern of social life that can be found not only in modern Western culture. I chose these terms deliberately to avoid the term "universal": the claim that something exists in more than one historical period or culture does not imply that it exists in *every* historical period or culture. These terms do not

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47. See, for example, Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 22; Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 204.

48. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Berkeley, CA 1999.

49. Apparently, nonrealists do think that historians *can* reconstruct the past accurately in this case.

imply that being religious is part of human nature.[50] There may be some who work with such a view, but according to my definition of "religion", an individual person or culture may have no religion, and so it is a contingent matter whether a religious form of life is or is not present.

Even when the terms "transhistorical" and "transcultural" are understood in this contingent and non-universal way, however, nonrealists still reject it. As Nongbri says, "I am unpersuaded that speaking of 'transhistorical realities' will help us".[51] Similarly, Daniel Dubuisson argues that the reason why we cannot use "religion" to name a reality that exists in more than one culture is that one cannot ever situate oneself "above" one's historical situation to identify something that is transhistorically or cross-culturally the same.[52] In fact, Dubuisson claims, two different cultures will not even share a single synonymous idea.[53] But this argument against transhistorical and transcultural realities claims too much. Accepting such a rule would make it impossible to apply *any* concept from one culture to another. It would follow that before modern Europeans arrived, one cannot speak of the existence of schools in Mali, shoes in China, or farmers in Peru. The claim that the categories of one culture cannot identify transhistorical and transcultural realities puts each culture into a conceptual silo.[54] My position is that human beings in many times and places have created forms of life predicated on beliefs about superempirical entities – what one can accurately call "religions" – and they have also created what one can accurately call "art", "politics", "fashion", and "sports". Historians and other scholars of culture need concepts for transhistorical and transcultural realities to do their work. Religious studies scholars need concepts such as "myth" and "ritual", or "esotericism" and "scholasticism", to do theirs. When using a cross-cultural taxon like these, one has to specify how a particular instance is like or unlike the others. I prefer a polythetic definition of "religion" precisely to specify properties of these forms of life that are typical or common but not universal or essential to the category. However, the claim that scholars should

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50. Nonrealists often add apriorism and universalism to the realist view to make it seem less plausible. One sees this rhetorical move in McCutcheon's statement that religion is not inevitable, necessary, or natural (McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 115) and in Nongbri's statement that he seeks to acknowledge cultural differences "instead of glossing them over by insisting that concepts from one particular culture and era must be universally applicable in all places and times" (Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 206).

51. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 224.

52. Dubuisson. *The Invention of Religions*, 47–48.

53. Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religions*, 133.

54. I suspect that there is a performative contradiction here and that one cannot even distinguish one culture from another without referring to transcultural realities.

eschew transhistorical and transcultural concepts would make the study of culture impossible while misunderstanding how concepts work.

Smith, Wittgenstein, and Heisenberg

Both Nongbri and I seek to connect our positions to those of other influential figures who have reflected on the relation between our concepts and realities in the world. In this section, I give a brief account of how a critical realist account relates to Nongbri's examples of Jonathan Z. Smith on religion, Ludwig Wittgenstein on meaning, and Werner Heisenberg on reality.

How to read the influential historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith is an interesting question. Nonrealists often claim that Smith shares their nonrealist view, but I think that this is false. Smith's *Imagining Religion* had a seminal role in inaugurating the reflexive turn in the academic study of religion.[55] That book treats "religion" as an invention that reflects the Christian assumptions of its creators, and its preface includes a nonrealist statement that has become infamous. Nevertheless, Smith does not say that critical reflection on the concept "religion" should lead scholars to adopt a heuristic view of it. In fact, I think that, like Talal Asad and Bruce Lincoln – and many others who reflect critically on the concept – Smith remains a realist about religion.[56]

Nongbri reads Smith differently. To bolster a nonrealist reading of Smith, Nongbri points to this quote: if scholars were to reflect on the concept "religion", Smith writes, "our object of interest would then be 'religion' as the general name of a general anthropological category, a nominal, intellectual construction, surely not to be taken as a 'reality'. After all, there are no existent genera".[57] Nongbri is right that Smith is clearly making an ontological claim and it is a negative one about what does not exist. How should we understand this statement?

I think that it helps to distinguish three classes of entities. Imagine people practicing a religion (for example, attending a Roman Catholic Mass). By my lights, each individual person is a concrete entity. By contrast, the Roman Catholic religion as a form of life does not exist in the concrete way that a person does. Some have therefore taken a nonrealist position and argued that we should not say religions exist; only religious individuals

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55. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago 1982.

56. For my realist interpretation of Smith, see Kevin Schilbrack "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", *Religion* 47 (2017), 161–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1203834. For a realist interpretation of discursive approaches including those of Asad and Lincoln, see Kevin Schilbrack, "The Realist Discursive Study of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (2024), 419–439, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10127.

57. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205.

exist.[58] However, because a religion shapes the behaviour of those who practice it – it has effects on the world – I prefer to say that religions do exist, they are real, though they are emergent structures whose effects depend on being instantiated by concrete individuals. Until a religion is instantiated by someone, that form of life is merely an abstract possibility and it has no effects. To make another contrast, "religion" differs from "a religion" in that it is a name for the general anthropological category that some use to gather forms of life that share certain properties into a set. The category, "religion", does not exist as a concrete entity like a religious individual; nor does it exist as an abstract form of life that shapes people's behaviour like "a religion". It is simply a sorting device, an idea.

It seems clear to me that in the quote above, Smith is speaking of this third class of entities.[59] Apart from how concrete individuals use them, categories and other intellectual constructions do not have effects on the world. "Religion" lacks the concrete kind of existence enjoyed by people or the abstract kind of existence of the emergent forms that people bring about. The crucial point for the present debate, however, is that this negative ontological statement about "religion" does not imply that religious people or religions did not exist. According to Smith, even where those people did not themselves have the concept of "religion" for sorting different forms of life, religious people and religions already existed. The recognition that the third term, "religion", is merely an idea does not imply the heuristic view. In fact, Smith is explicit that it is "factually incorrect" to say that religions and religious people did not exist where the word was not known.[60] This is why I consider him a realist.

It is also important for debates about the concept of "religion" to have a handle on Ludwig Wittgenstein's account of meaning. Nongbri endorses Wittgenstein's account, according to which meaning arises out of how language is used by people. On this account, the meaning of a term is not stashed somehow "in" the concept as one might think of an oak tree hidden as a potential in an acorn. The meaning of a term also does not come from the term's connection to that to which it refers, as when people say "'dog' means one of those" and they point at a dog. Instead, as Nongbri rightly says, meaning depends for Wittgenstein on the give and take of social interactions as people employ the word for their own purposes. It is through

58. This view is recommended in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, New York 1963.

59. Smith famously distinguishes exactly these three levels. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago 1998, 269–284.

60. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", 269.

open-ended and evolving patterns of use that a term such as "dog" gets its meaning, and this is also why "dog" can be meaningfully used by people to refer to something very different than its original referents, as people stretch and bend and play with the concept.

Nongbri says that I must have discomfort with this account of meaning,[61] but that is not true: the above account is exactly how I think that meaning works.[62] In fact, it is because I think that meaning depends on the contingencies of use that it is no surprise that the word "religion" could evolve from its original sense in antiquity to refer to a person's scruples, to its sense in the middle ages to refer to monastic orders, and then to its modern sense to refer to a cross-cultural taxon. Nongbri proposes that I do not accept a Wittgensteinian account of meaning, because I *connect* the term "religion" to something real in the world.[63] But there is a problem here, and it is a telling one. First, I do see a connection between words and their referents, but I do not claim that the connection to a referent is how the term "religion" gets its meaning. I consider Wittgenstein's non-essentialist, social account of meaning in terms of "language games" correct, just as Nongbri does. However, unlike nonrealists, I hold that the fact that the meaning of words grows out of contingent social practices does not decide the issue of reference. That contingent social origin certainly does not make the idea of a connection between language and the world impossible. On the contrary, I think that language games *enable* the referential use of a linguistic term to name extra-linguistic things in the world. I do not draw a nonrealist conclusion from Wittgenstein's account of meaning. Moreover, the connection between "religion" and a transhistorical reality that bothers Nongbri is not really my doing. According to almost everyone on the planet today who uses "religion", the word refers to an aspect of culture found in many societies in history. One cannot appeal to Wittgenstein to object to this referential use. As Wittgenstein says, "this language-game is played".[64]

Lastly, Werner Heisenberg. With aplomb, Nongbri tells two stories from the history of science: the story of the chemical experiments on combustion that led to the concept of phlogiston and then to that of oxygen, and the story of how what are now called "atoms" were theorized with models of indivisible nuggets and then to spheres whose insides were organized like a solar system and then to fields of energy. Nongbri uses these stories to

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61. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205–206.
62. I accept not only Wittgenstein's account of meaning, but also the "family resemblance" account of concepts that Wittgenstein applied to games, and I argue that "religion" is best understood as that kind of concept. Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion".
63. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205–206.
64. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., London 1958, § 654.

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support the heuristic view in two ways. First, by historicizing the work of theorizing the natural world, these narratives show that these scientific accounts of what is real, taken as knowledge for a while but now abandoned, were not mere "mistakes" or "misconceptions", but were no less careful, systematic, and justified in their time than the theories that we take as correct today. As a consequence, the non-reality of the concept of phlogiston (its "failure to refer") complicates the assumption that the ideas we accept today have any real referent.[65] The study of subatomic reality similarly complicates the realist claim that theorizing requires reference to entities that exist independent of our inquiry into them. Given that the investigator's observations have an effect on the behaviour of the entities being studied (a situation that has analogies in the study of human cultures), what it means to speak of these entities independent of one's inquiry becomes a tricky question. As Heisenberg says, "the conception of the objective reality of the elementary particles has thus evaporated".[66] Heisenberg proposes, along with Paul Dirac (1902–1984) and Niels Bohr (1885–1962), that it is better to think of theory simply in terms of how things appear in human experiences and to set aside the question of what exists outside that realm. One cannot settle the question of how things are apart from us, and one does not have to settle that question for an inquiry to work. Nongbri then extends this insight to historiography: it is not only in physics but in history as well that scholars do not study things in themselves but rather things as organized by the scholars' interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules of how to read the evidence.

I agree that Nongbri's two stories do carry a substantive philosophical implication for our debate, namely, they should lead scholars to drop the goal of what might be called "objectivist realism". I borrow the label "objectivist realism" from Ronald N. Giere (1938–2020) to name the view that scientists or philosophers *can* identify (or even that they should *seek* to identify) knowledge that transcends all perspectives.[67] All investigations of the world are from some perspective or another, and a scholar's perspective is shaped, as Nongbri says, by their interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules of how

65. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 211–212.

66. Quoted in Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 217.

67. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism*, 4–6. Objectivist realism is equivalent to what Richard Bernstein calls "objectivism", that is, the claim that can identify (or even that one should seek to identify) knowledge that can serve as an ahistorical Archimedean point. It is also equivalent to what Hilary Putnam calls "metaphysical realism", the claim that "there is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'". See Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Philadelphia, PA 1988, 8; Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge 1981, 49, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398.

to read the evidence. Successful inquiries do not need to achieve a God's eye view.

However, these two stories should not lead scholars to drop realism altogether. Realism makes a distinction between saying that a theory is justified and saying that it is true, and when realists take a theory as true, we say that it agrees with reality. When one drops the notion of agreement with reality, one eliminates one's means for distinguishing between theories that are true and those that are (merely) justified. Those who drop the notion of agreement with reality as part of their understanding of inquiry end up saying things such as "science is nothing but a social construction" or "truth is nothing but a function of power". To put this point in Roy Bhaskar's critical realist terms, every inquiry has both an epistemic dimension that consists of one's interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules and an ontic dimension that concerns whether one's results of one's inquiry agree with reality. According to critical realism, it is true, as Nongbri has insisted, that one cannot compare one's theory to a reality free of one's perspective. One compares one's theory to evidence that is also interpreted from some perspective. As William James (1842–1910) said, "the trail of the human serpent is over everything".[68] Nevertheless, to offer an account of inquiry in physics, history, or religious studies without the notion of agreement with reality is to eliminate the ontic dimension and, in that case, the work that a scholar does can no longer be called an inquiry.

The heuristic view of "religion" is part of a long-standing debate between realism and nonrealism, but I do not see that debate as unhelpful or stalemated. On the contrary, both Nongbri and I are moving away from extreme versions in this debate to find a stronger position that incorporates the insights of each. For example, Nongbri says his view does not deny that an external world exists and that the position he seeks could be called a "humble realism".[69] And my view does not deny the ineliminable effects of the inquirer's perspective, and I repudiate the goal of objectivist realism. In these

68. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, London 1907, 64.

69. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 219. Many social constructionists grant that there exists a world outside human concepts, but they hold that the world has no structure apart from our concepts. Apart from our concepts, according to this view, reality is just undifferentiated, unorganized "white noise", and entities are differentiated as entities only through human mental operations. This is the view that Russell T. McCutcheon has proposed (for multiple quotes, see Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", 164–166). One sees it also in the social constructionist account of science of Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, who, like the heuristic view, argues that the entities described in the sciences emerge out of constructive operations without assuming that these operations match any pre-existing order of the real. See Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science*, Oxford 1981.

ways, this debate shows progress in what one might call the philosophy of religious studies, that is, the study of the epistemological, metaphysical, and axiological commitments at work in the study of religion. However, insofar as the scholar adopts a materialist account of human beings as acting within structures that they may not have recognized or named, the scholar will need theoretical terms such as "religion" that name real entities operating in the world. ▲

SUMMARY

Scholars are increasingly recognizing that the concept of "religion" has evolved in its meanings over the centuries and that its contemporary use as a means of sorting cultures around the world is a product of relatively recent European interests. One response to this issue has been to propose that scholars should understand "religion" as a heuristic device, that is, as a tool invented in western modernity but not as a concept that names a transhistorical and transcultural reality that has existed "out there" in the world before the term was invented. In this paper, I clarify and critique the heuristic sense of the term. I argue that the costs of a heuristic understanding are severe and that an alternative, realist understanding of the concept is better. On this realist view, a "religion" names a form of life based on belief in superempirical realities, whether or not the term "religion" was known to those practicing it.