

Chapter One Summary

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This chapter begins by discussing the meaning of the term “religion” and providing several possible definitions. It then argues that each definition tends to reflect the background of the person who made it. Thus a sociologist defines religion sociologically while a theologian defines religion theologically. Such definitions can be interesting but they are of little help in recognizing a religion when we see one. Therefore, it proposes using Ninian Smart’s model of religion which helps scholars distinguish between religions and other forms of social activity that have religious overtones. In outlining Smart’s model the related concepts of institutions, tradition, ritual, sacral sentiments, myth, and doctrines are discussed.

Then some other ways of viewing religion are considered along with ideas about implicit religion and the work of various scholars in the field. Here the work of Paul Tillich and F. B. Welbourn are particularly important.

Finally, there is a discussion of whether or not Religious Studies is a field of a discipline and it is argued that it is a field. Disciplines are areas of academic study with their own distinct theories and methods. An academic field borrows from various disciplines to consider an area, issue, problem, or topic. Thus for Religious Studies the focus is on religion in its many manifestations and to study religion we need to use the tools available from disciplines like anthropology and sociology, history, philology, and philosophy.

Here are some key concepts:

- *What is religion?*
 - Durkheim: “a unified system of beliefs and practice relative to sacred things ... beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church”
 - Kant: “the recognition of all duties as divine commands”
 - Müller: “a body of doctrines handed down by tradition, or in canonical books, and containing all that constitutes the faith of Jew, Christian, or Hindu”
 - Smart: “a set of institutionalized rituals, identified with a tradition and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines”
 - Dooyeweerd: “the innate impulse of human selfhood to direct itself toward the true or toward a pretended absolute Origin of all temporal diversity of meaning”
 - Stark/Bainbridge: “human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions, they later refined the definition to “systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” and spoke of five dimensions of “religiousness” belief, practice, experience, knowledge, and consequences

- *What are myths?*
 - Bultmann: a story that is simply untrue because it is opposed to scientific truth. Nevertheless, behind the myth is some true event or teaching. We discover this by demythologizing the myth to get to its message.

- Eliade/Campbell/Jung: some sort of special story containing unique insights into religious truth, archaic insights often lost to humans living in industrial societies. This definition was, and still is, the one used by Fascists and Nazis in Europe.
 - Malinowski: any story which affects the way people live; not necessarily historical or unhistorical, it can be true/false, historical/unhistorical; enables members of different societies to make sense of their lives/world; concerned with the relationship of a people with other peoples/nature/supernatural
 - Hexham/Poewe: a story with culturally formative power. This is the way myth is used in this book and is the most useful definition.
- *What is “implicit” religion as compared to “explicit” religion?*
 - The actual practices and beliefs of people as discovered by others through careful observation of their actions as opposed to simply taking their words at face value; what people actually believe is determined not by what they say (explicit religion) but by the way they live (implicit religion).
- *Who is Who?*
 - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): one of the most important philosophers of all time. Born in Königsberg, East Prussia, he spent most of his life in scholarly study. Awakened from what he called his “dogmatic slumber” by the works of David Hume, sought a philosophical basis for knowledge which avoided complete skepticism. His work also tends to reduce religion to morality. He is best known for his:
 - Friedrich Maximilian Müller (1823-1900), who is known as "the father of comparative religion" was a German philologist and orientalist who became professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University. He translated the Rg Veda (1849-1874, 6 Vols.), wrote numerous books on religion, and edited the Sacred Books of the East series.
 - Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the founders of modern sociology. His main works were: *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and *The Elementary form of Religious Life* (1912).
 - Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was a German/American, philosopher-theologian who fled to the United States, where he taught at Union Theological Seminary. His work combined Platonism, medieval mysticism, German idealism and existentialism. His best known books are *Systematic Theology* (1963), *The Courage to Be* (1952) and *Theology of Culture* (1959).
 - Fred (F.B.) Welbourn? A British scholar who pioneered the study of African religions particularly African Independent Churches. His main works were: *East African Rebels* (1961), *A Place to Feel at Home* (1966), *Atoms and Ancestors* (1968) This book may be downloaded in pdf format from: <http://www.understandingworldreligions.com>
 - Rodney Stark (1940-) is a leading American Sociologist and early proponent of the secularization thesis which he later repudiated. He is best known for his co-authored article "Hellfire and Delinquency" which found no correlation between religious belief and delinquent behavior: a position which he now regards as wrong due to inadequate sampling. His many books include: *Sociology* (1985), *The Future of Religion* (1985), *For the Glory of God* (2003)

- Ninian Smart (1927-2001) pioneered Religious Studies as an academic field at the University of Lancaster and promoted its teaching in English schools. His main works were: *Reasons and Faiths*" (1958), *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (1964), *The World's Religions* (1989), and *The Long Search* television series.
- Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) was Professor of New Testament studies at the University of Marburg. He developed the method of Form Criticism as a radical methodological skepticism. In his later work he developed a program of demythologizing the New Testament in terms of the existentialist philosophy. His works include *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921), *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1960) and *Theology of the New Testament* (1952 and 1955 Vols. 1 and 2).
- Mircea Eliade (1907-1988) was a Rumanian scholar who shaped the teaching of Religious Studies in America. His work reflects an interest in a mythical abstract spirituality. Critics accuse him of being a Fascist. His main works were: *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom* (1936), *The Myth of the Eternal Return*" (1954), *Patterns in Comparative Religion*" (1958).