

Introduction

The God of old bids us all abide by His injunctions.

Then shall we get whatever we want, be it white or red.

—TRADITIONAL GHANAIAAN AKAN PRAYER ON TALKING DRUMS¹

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

*But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient,
and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and
worship them,*

I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

—DEUTERONOMY 30:15-17

Anyone who wants to understand the world today has got to understand religion. The majority of people in the world affiliate with a religion, and many do so fervently. Religious practices have been a part of *homo sapiens* life since the beginning of our discernable history.² No human society has

1. Quoted in Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, 1983. *Symposium of the Whole*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 137.

2. Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley, eds. 2009. *Becoming Human*. Cambridge: Cambridge

2 INTRODUCTION

existed that did not include some religion. A broad array of religions exists around the globe today, with a single religion dominating society in some places, while in others many traditions mix, morph, and clash. Efforts by some modern states to do away with religions have failed. Though thin and weak in some regions, religion is robust and growing in other parts of the world. On top of their relevance to individuals, contemporary religions produce major political, cultural, economic, and social consequences around the globe. Human life simply does not boil down to secular economics and politics. Understanding many major problems today is impossible without accounting for religion's influences. Neither can we appreciate much that is widely considered good in the world without taking religious factors into account. Academic scholars and elites often ignore religion. In doing so, they risk ignorance about a crucial part of human life that frequently affects the political, economic, family, military, and cultural phenomena they care about. When we understand religion and its role in societies, we can better understand our world.

This book explains in general theoretical terms what religion is, how it works, and why and how religion influences people and societies. Offered here is not a comparative study of various religions, but a social scientific theory of religion that helps make sense of all religions. Readers will learn not about the particular beliefs and practices of some specific religions, but about the nature of religious beliefs and practices per se that make religions what they are. By learning to approach and understand religion theoretically, readers will become equipped to grasp and explain any specific religion that may interest them.

Real-life events in recent decades have made clear that religion remains a crucial feature of human life. One cannot glance at the news without seeing religion's impact on local activities, national politics, and international war and peace. Yet social scientists who study religion seem somewhat constrained in their ability to explain religion well. Some are tired from frustrating theoretical debates; others focus on trivial rather than important topics; and yet others doubt whether religion as a subject matter even exists to be studied. My own field of sociology of religion seems like it could use the re-energizing of a better theoretical vision that stimulates new work. So although today we all need to understand religion well, the available theoretical resources may not be up to the task. In this situation, my purpose is

University Press; Robert Bellah. 2011. *Religion in Human Evolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap.

to advance an approach that explains religion clearly in order to enhance understanding and help generate fruitful new research.

The Argument in Brief

I develop this book's theory of religion by answering five basic questions, which provide the titles of its five chapters. First I explain what religion is. Then I describe what causal powers religion generates for influencing people, institutions, and cultures. Next I examine the key cognitive process involved in practicing religion, namely, explaining events by attribution to the influence of superhuman powers. I then explore why people are religious (or not), and in particular why humans seem to be the one animal species on earth that practices religion. Finally, I consider the question of religion's future fate in modern societies.

I begin in chapter 1 by defining what religion is. Religion, I will argue, is best defined as a complex of culturally prescribed practices that are based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers. These powers may be personal or impersonal, but they are always superhuman in the dual sense that they can do things that humans cannot do and that they do not depend for their existence on human activities. Religious people engage in complexes of practices in order to gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these superhuman powers. The hope involved in the cultural prescribing of these practices is to realize human goods and to avoid bads, especially (but not only) to avert misfortunes and receive blessings and deliverance from crises. Key to this definition is the dual emphasis on *prescribed practices* and *superhuman powers*, which distinguish it from other approaches that focus instead on people's beliefs or meanings (rather than practices) and on the supernatural, sacred, transcendent, divine, or ultimate concern (rather than superhuman powers). This emphasis helps to avoid problems that plague other theories of religion.

This approach to religion distinguishes between a conceptual definition of what religion *is* and the myriad reasons why people *do* religion. The conceptual definition, we will see, references public traditions, institutions, and cultural prescriptions. The empirical reasons why people actually do religion, by contrast, often involve not just the desire to seek help from superhuman powers but also a variety of other subjective motivations, some of which actually may not be particularly religious, such as wanting to meet friends at prayer services. I will argue that we cannot define religion conceptually by the reasons people practice religion, any more than we can

4 INTRODUCTION

define politics by adding up people's reasons for voting for certain candidates in elections. We need to differentiate theoretically between what religion itself *is* and why people *do* it, even if the answers to these questions overlap. Doing so maintains theoretical clarity and opens up many interesting research questions.

When people practice religion for whatever reasons, I argue in chapter 2, they create a variety of new social features and powers that are able to influence people's lives and the world. These include things like new forms of identity, community, meaning, self-expression, aesthetics, ecstasy, social control, and legitimacy. I call these religion's "causal capacities," things religions *can do* (again, distinct from what religion *is*). These causal capacities, we will see, are secondary, dependent, and derivative aspects of religion's core nature. Nevertheless, they are crucial in forming the character of specific religious traditions. The goods they offer are also some of the reasons why many people practice religion. And such causal capacities explain how and why religions exert influence on people's actions and in cultures and social institutions—in ways that, I will argue, are far more extensive and diverse than many observers realize. Why does religion matter? For social scientists, part of the answer is that religion can make a difference, sometimes a big one, in how people's lives and the world operate.

Having described what religion is and what it can do, I explore in chapter 3 the particular human mental process upon which the practice of religion depends: the making of "causal attributions" to superhuman powers. This simply refers to religious people coming to believe that certain things happen (or don't) in life because of superhuman powers. They can include both obviously religious outcomes (like feeling God's forgiveness) and more worldly ones (like a bountiful harvest); they can range from the profound (a miraculous healing from a fatal disease) to the seemingly trivial (remembering the right answer on a quiz). What matters here is that people attribute some event or condition at least partially to the influence of superhuman powers. And since religious people do not always get what they want, we will also examine the various ways that people interpret the successes (or failures) of their religious practices. Along the way, we will consider questions about the nature of "religious experiences," miracles, and other kinds of superhuman interventions in human life. We will also explore some common cognitive biases that routinely influence human thinking, to better understand how and why people can easily attribute ordinary life outcomes to the influence of superhuman powers.

I then turn in chapter 4 to investigate why humans are even religious in the first place. Why are there any religions at all? And why are humans the only species on earth that practices religion? I will argue that the answer lies in humans' unique possession of a complicated combination of natural capacities and limitations. Natural, unique human *capacities* make it possible for humans to conceive of and believe in superhuman powers that are not immediately present, and to find ways to try to access their help. And humanity's natural *limitations* provide good motivations for seeking such help. The uncomfortable existential space created by the collision of amazing human powers and severe human incapacities provides the grounds in which religions germinate, grow, and flourish. Seeking the help of superhuman powers to live in that difficult space—and to realize humanly good and avoid bad things within it—is the central reason why people practice religion. Humans also often practice religion because they enjoy the secondary causal capacities that religion affords. I will additionally reference a large body of recent research in the cognitive science of religion to suggest that the regular operation of ordinary human perceptions, the human brain, and common human cognitive processes work together to make religion a natural and fairly effortless way for people to think about and live in the world. Religion actually comes quite naturally, it turns out, given human neurobiology, cognition, and psychology.

Finally, in chapter 5 I answer the question of religion's future first by suggesting that until human nature fundamentally changes, many humans will almost certainly want to continue to practice religion; that humans will continue to generate new religions; that religions will continue to be internally transformed over time; and that some religions will grow in size, strength, and significance, while others will decline. Predictions about the inevitable decline and possible disappearance of religion in modern society are incorrect. However, such "secularization theories" are not completely wrong or useless. Properly appropriated, they offer valuable insights into social causal mechanisms that decrease religious belief and practices. But to understand how these matters really work, I argue, we have to discard the simplistic assumption that secularization theory is either right or wrong. Instead, we need to re-conceptualize our analyses to recognize the variety of causal mechanisms that operate simultaneously, in sometimes contradictory and sometimes reinforcing ways, to produce different religious outcomes, depending on the specific historical conditions and social contexts of particular situations. In short, our understanding of religion's fate in modernity (or

anytime, actually) needs to take into account greater complexity, contingency, and path-dependency than has been typical in the past.

That summarizes the main argument of the chapters that follow. The remainder of this introduction focuses on related philosophical and meta-theoretical issues, to which scholars should attend. Non-scholarly readers who might get bogged down in philosophy, however, may want to skip ahead to read the last paragraph of this introduction (which makes a point important for everyone) and then proceed to chapter 1.

Theoretical Influences

My argument in this book is shaped by three key theoretical influences: first, a substantive, practice-centered view of religion; second, the philosophy of critical realism; and, third, the social theory of personalism. The first of these is a view of religion that is defined substantively, in terms of the meanings of a type of actions, and focuses on human practices before beliefs, following the previous work of Martin Riesebrodt and Melford Spiro.³ This approach understands religions as culturally prescribed systems of practices seeking to access superhuman powers in order to realize human goods and for help in solving problems, both minor and profound. I believe this is the best way to understand religion, but it needs elaboration.⁴ I agree with Stephen Bush that the triad of religious experience, meaning, and

3. Martin Riesebrodt. 2010. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Melford Spiro. 2003 [1966]. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation." Pp. 187–222 in Spiro. *Culture and Human Nature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. My argument also closely parallels that of Kevin Schilbrack. 2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell. Pp. 115–148, which I unfortunately did not discover until this book was nearly completed.

4. I use the word "best" here intentionally, as an alternative to the triumphalist "the only true," on the one hand, and the relativistic "just another interesting and useful," on the other. All human knowledge is fallible and can be improved upon, yet some ideas are better than others. "Best" here combines both a commitment to the defensible preferability of an idea, with an openness to future revisions, improvement, or perhaps replacement, something like "the approach that the best currently available reasoning about evidence compels us to affirm over others." Some have suggested that I claim merely that my argument is internally logically coherent with the first principles of critical realism, not true or more accurate than other approaches. But a critical realist, operating with an "alethic" theory of truth (William Alston. 1996. *A Realist Conception of Truth*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press), cannot settle for a mere "coherentist" epistemology defended by the likes of W.V. Quine (1978. *The Web of Belief*. New York: McGraw-Hill). Theories need to be not merely internally coherent, but adequate to reality, as conceptual representations of what exists and how it works (see Christian Smith. 2010. *What Is a Person?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 209–212).

power needs to be retained and integrated in a new way, and that religious practices provide the right theoretical framework for doing so.⁵ Riesebrodt and Spiro, for their parts, pointed us very far in the right direction. But I think their ideas need developing and expressing in ways more accessible to wider audiences.

The second theoretical influence is the philosophy of “critical realism.” Behind all theoretical and empirical scholarship stands some philosophy of reality and human knowledge (“metaphysics” and “epistemology”), and in the deeper background there usually stands a philosophy of what is good and bad, right and wrong (ethics). Many social scientists do not pay attention to the philosophies that underlie their work, but that does not decrease their influence. It only means they are less visible and acknowledged. Certain general background philosophies have especially influenced the study of religion.⁶ While all have some valuable insights to contribute, each I think is inadequate by itself (and in some ways highly misleading and unhelpful). A better alternative is critical realism.⁷ Many existing works explain and advocate critical realism, and I need not repeat their arguments here. A few comments should suffice to help make sense of what follows.

Critical realism tells us to think of all science as learning about what exists and how and why it works. What exists is a matter of “ontology,”⁸ and

5. Stephen Bush. 2014. *Visions of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

6. These are positivist empiricism, hermeneutical interpretivism, postmodern deconstructionism, and pragmatism. Hermeneutical interpretivism is correct in most of its basic claims; however, it is often insufficient in not taking seriously enough the scholarly aim of understanding not only meanings but also *causal* influences in human life. One important account of this position—drawing out, problematically, in my view, some Wittgensteinian ideas to certain wrong conclusions—is Peter Winch. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Also see Phil Hutchinson, Rupert Read, and Wes Sharrock. 2008. *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate. Positivist empiricism and postmodern deconstructionism are more problematic.

7. Critical realism is a meta-theory or philosophy of science, including social science, not a specific theory of religion or anything else. It is not a general explanation of how a particular part of human social life works, but rather a higher-order system of ideas and claims about reality, how it is ordered, and how it functions that creates a realistic framework within which good specific theories can be constructed. It is possible to develop different theories about any given topic within the critical realist framework. This book proposes not “the” critical realist theory of religion, since critical realism can generate and be compatible with more than one substantive theory in some areas. Still, not every theory on offer fits critical realism. Many theories critical realism criticizes as presupposing the wrong ideas about reality, causation, science, explanation, and so on. What I develop here is one theory shaped by critical realism, though not the only possible critical-realism-informed theory of religion.

8. Here I make a distinction between ontology and metaphysics, working with the former and ignoring the latter. Ontology, as I mean it, is simply about what has being in reality, the

how things work is about “relational causal influences.” Critical realism focuses our attention on identifying the important objects, including social objects, that *exist* in reality, on “entities”;⁹ using empirical evidence and our best reasoning abilities to learn what (often non-observable) *causal powers* those objects possess and can exert under certain conditions (“causal mechanisms”); and developing, from that knowledge, explanations about how and why the complex world operates the way it does to produce conditions and outcomes of interest. In short, this book first seeks to theorize the “social ontology” of religion and to describe how and why religion operates causally in human life as it does. Many other approaches tend to be skittish about naming what religion essentially *is* and either avoid the idea of causal explanation altogether or misconstrue the nature of causality. But it is impossible to do good social science while bracketing ontology and sidelining causality.

The best way to summarize critical realism is to say that it combines ontological realism, epistemic perspectivalism, and judgmental rationality, and insists that *all three be held together* in thought and investigation. That means that much of reality exists and operates independently of our human

character of entities that have being, that are. The phrase “religious ontology” merely references what religion is, which is conceptually distinct from what religion can do (causal capacities) and what religion is like (features). Metaphysics, by comparison, is more ambitiously concerned with the fundamental nature of all being and the ultimate constitution of the totality of reality. That is not a concern of this book nor of most of critical realism used in social science. So readers should understand that when I speak of ontology, I am making no larger metaphysical claims.

9. By “entities” I mean parts of reality, whether material (bricks, airplanes) or immaterial (beliefs, light waves), and whether “raw facts” (gravity, rivers) or “institutional facts” (money, states). Some thinkers find talk about “entities” problematic, objecting to the idea that distinct objects exist that have particular essences. Understood properly, however, talk about entities is legitimate and necessary. An entity is just something that has existence, that has being, and so is and exists. The word “entity” derives from the Latin word *ens*, meaning “being.” To believe that some entities exist in reality is a necessary presupposition for having a discussion about how we should properly talk about things. But to believe in entities does not require a commitment to some kind of neo-platonic realism, namely, the belief that every instance of an evident thing represents the embodiment of a more real universal form or ideal. Nor does believing in entities force us to accept misguided essentialist accounts of reality that claim that some of what are only humanly constructed, historically and culturally limited institutional facts are actually natural, fixed, or necessary. Those kinds of claims confuse the general fact that some entities exist with specific natures with particular claims about certain entities as possessing particular natures when in fact they do not. We ought not to accept anti-essentialism wholesale only because particular retail claims about the nature of some entities have been wrong, oppressive, and damaging.

awareness of it (ontological realism¹⁰), that our human knowledge about reality is always historically and socially situated and conceptually mediated¹¹ (epistemic perspectivalism), and that it is nonetheless possible for humans over time to improve their knowledge about reality, to adjudicate rival accounts, and so to make justified truth claims about what is real and how it works (judgmental rationality). All three of these beliefs must go together to promote the acquisition of human knowledge. Stated negatively, critical realism rejects “ontological anti-realism” (that reality is itself a mind-dependent, human construction), “epistemological foundationalism” (that a bedrock foundation exists for human knowledge that is certain and universally binding on rational persons), and “judgmental relativism” (that truth claims are all relative and impossible to adjudicate). Only by holding critical realism’s three key beliefs together, and rejecting their denials, can we practice good social science.

On the matter of understanding causation, critical realism rejects the dominant positivist empiricist view that causation is about the association of observable events, often demonstrated as the statistical correlation of measured variables. Instead, it takes the more realistic “natural powers” view of causation, according to which all real entities possess by their

10. Critical realism provides conceptual distinctions essential for making sense of reality. One is between the real, the actual, and the empirical. The *real* is what exists: material, non-material, and social entities that have structures and capacities. The real exists whether we know or understand it, possessing objective being potentially apart from human awareness of it, even when parts of it are not expressed in actuality. The *actual* is what happens in the world, when entities that belong to the real activate their powers and capacities. The actual happens in time and space, whether any person experiences it or not (“If a tree falls in the forest . . .”). The *empirical* consists of what humans experience or observe, either directly or indirectly. So what we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual): The actual comprises much more than the empirical. And neither the actual nor the empirical is identical to all that has existence (the real). What is real is much greater than what *happens*, and to think otherwise is to engage in what critical realists call the fallacy of “actualism.” The empirical is a subset of the actual; and the actual is the outcome of operations of entities that are real. The three should not be conflated. Maintaining these distinctions enables us to understand that certain entities can and do exist even if they are empirically not observable. Only when they activate their causal powers in ways that produce events in time and space do they become actual, and thus potentially observable. The causal powers of other real entities may counteract or neutralize their causal powers, in which case their effects may not become actual, even though their real causal capacities are operating. That we do not see or cannot experience or measure something at some place and time in the actual does not mean it is not real and potentially or actually exercising causal powers. To think otherwise conflates the real with the empirical, which is a huge mistake.

11. Certain kinds of non-cognitive knowledge—such as knowing how to ride a bicycle—may not be conceptually mediated but directly embodied.

ontological nature certain capacities that, under specific conditions, can make or prevent changes from happening in the world.¹² Causal explanation thus consists in describing the causal capacities of the real entities in question, the arrangement of the conditions that in temporal processes triggered or neutralized those capacities, and the consequences of the “causal mechanisms” that as a result operated as they did.¹³ In other words, explaining causally involves narrating who or what the *agents* were, what they *could* do, what they *did* do and *why* under particular circumstances, and what happened as a *result*.¹⁴ This book focuses on what natural causal powers religion possesses, the various ways those capacities are expressed, and their characteristic outcomes.

Critical realism also differs from positivist empiricism by emphasizing the complexity, contingency, and “path-dependence” of most causal pro-

12. Ruth Groff and John Greco (eds.). 2013. *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy*. New York: Routledge; Ruth Groff (ed.). *Revitalizing Causality*. New York: Routledge; Douglas Porpora. 2008. “Recovering Causality.” In A. Maccarini, E. Morandi, and R. Prandini (eds.). *Realismo Sociologico*. Genova-Milano: Marietti; Bert Danermark et al. 2002. *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. New York: Routledge. Pp. 52–53, 56, 59, 74; Douglas Porpora. 1993. “Cultural Rules and Material Relations.” *Sociological Theory*. 11: 212–229; Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum. 2011. *Getting Causes from Powers*. New York: Oxford University Press; Anjan Chakravartty. 2007. *A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Brian Ellis. 2001. *Scientific Essentialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Brian Ellis. 2002. *The Philosophy of Nature: A Guide to the New Essentialism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press; Andrew Sayer. 1992. *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. New York: Routledge; also see Robert Koons. 2000. *Realism Regained*. New York: Oxford University Press.

13. Porpora. “Recovering Causality”; “Cultural Rules”; Danermark et al. *Explaining Society*; Sayer, *Method in Social Science*; Koons 2000. *Realism Regained*.

14. Causal realism applies to human actions. Immanuel Kant famously argued that the possibility of human freedom requires a disconnection from the deterministic forces of natural causation, then viewed in Newtonian terms. Critical realism sees no need to protect persons from life in a causally real universe, because it views causation not as deterministic but rather about “tendencies.” Some causes in the natural world may be deterministic, but others are not. Causation is about natural powers, capacities, limitations, and tendencies, not linear, closed-system, deterministic forces. These operate in complex and interactive ways in different “open-systems” environments to produce various, complicated, and often unpredictable outcomes; many operative causal forces end up producing no observable effects. Human persons, in particular, enjoy many unique powers and capacities that are characterized by openness, creativity, agency, freedom, and unexpectedness (Smith. *What Is a Person?*). Critical realism thus understands human activity not as transcending but embedded in and shaped by a causally operative though not deterministic world. Causal realism thus does not compromise human agency in action. Persons remain the purposeful agents of many of their own significant motivations and actions. By “human agency” I mean *the capacity to exercise personal powers and capabilities to cause events to happen in the world*. Causally oriented social sciences thus do not need to eliminate humanistically oriented assumptions, studies, and approaches to human life, because freedom and determination are not opposites; agency and structure need not compete directly against each other for influence.

cesses in human life.¹⁵ Other background philosophies that influence much scholarship today instead push hard for simplicity (“parsimony”) against complexity. Some also seem implicitly to be trying to discover something like scientific “laws of social life”—conceived as the regular association of observable events (“if A [probably] B”). Critical realism says that reality does not work that way, and there are few if any such non-trivial laws to be discovered. What is regular and “generalizable” in the human world are not associations between events, but rather the natural causal capacities of different entities, the conditions that tend to activate them, and the characteristic outcomes they tend to produce in particular contexts. Understanding those better, and not correlating variables, is what good science is really about. Finding a correlation between variables explains nothing. At best, it gives us an interesting fact that may *then* need causally explaining. Yet understanding causal processes well requires a readiness to take seriously the complexities, contingency, and path-dependency involved in real causal operations. More than obsessive parsimony, we need in our accounts “adequate complexity.” This book’s theory therefore does not take the form of “the more of variable X then the more (or less) of variable Y.” Instead it speaks about natural causal capacities of real social (including religious) entities and their tendencies to operate in particular ways under certain conditions, while acknowledging the massive complexities involved.

Finally, critical realism influences this book in its commitment to “judgmental rationality.” That is the belief that, with time, research effort, and good, reasoned arguments about the best available evidence, it is indeed possible to advance our human knowledge about reality and how it works. Science, broadly construed, can and does progress in its knowledge. Inquiring people at one time can better understand what is real and how it works better than similar people did at earlier times. That progress is not guaranteed, but it is possible and often actual. If this were not true, it would be pointless to research and to read and write scholarly publications, for none of it would be getting us anywhere. Even so, more than a few people today are skeptical about progress in scientific knowledge. Some think science does not discover but “socially constructs” truths about reality. Others fear the arrogance and conformism they think is implied by the idea of scientific progress. Still others worry about the lack of moral constraints on scientific

15. George Steinmetz. 1998. “Critical Realism and Historical Sociology.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 40: 170–186; Steinmetz. 2005. “Scientific Authority and the Transition to Post-Fordism.” In George Steinmetz (ed.). *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Pp. 275–323.

advances. The first group is simply wrong, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁶ The second and third express legitimate concerns, yet none that negate the fact of possible scientific progress. We can believe in the advance of human knowledge about reality without being arrogant and oppressive or deeming science morally autonomous. But we cannot give up the hope of coming to better understand our world and human experience through systematic inquiry. And for that to happen, we cannot merely examine all the theories about a subject and let them stand. We should make reasoned judgments about which accounts seem to explain reality better than others.¹⁷ That is what I seek to do in this book as it pertains to religion. To be sure, much of critical realism's influence I will not make explicit, but it definitely runs as the governing background meta-theory shaping this book's argument.

The third theoretical influence on this work is the social theory of personalism. I have written at length about personalist social theory elsewhere and will not repeat myself here.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that personalism insists that all good theories of human social life build upon the essential facts of human personhood. The ground and emergent reality of all things humanly social are persons. So only a proper account of the nature, capacities, limitations, goods, and ends of human persons can sustain an adequate social theoretical account of human life. Personalism argues that humans have a particular nature that is defined by our biologically grounded yet emergently real personal being and its features, especially our powers, incapacities, tendencies, and natural goods. Human persons are not social constructions "all the way down," but natural entities with a real, identifiable condition and telic orientations, which are of course profoundly socially formed. Personalism observes that human persons have a natural proper end (*telos*) toward which to live—namely, *eudaimonia*, happy flourishing—that (by my account) is realized by the progressive attainment of six natural, basic goods. Religion potentially helps persons to realize those six goods and so move toward personal flourishing. This book's theory of religion, therefore, builds upon a personalist account of what human beings are, our natural capacities and incapacities, the natural goods of personhood, and the ends toward which our actions and interactions move. Its personalist

16. Smith. *What Is a Person?* Pp. 119–219.

17. See footnote 4.

18. Smith. *What Is a Person*; Christian Smith. 2015. *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; also see Christian Smith. 2003. *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, which I would characterize as proto-personalist.

influences become especially clear when I discuss why humans are religious in chapter 5, but personalism is always running in the background, even if usually inconspicuously.

Final Clarifications

I said earlier that my definition of religion in this book closely follows that of Martin Riesebrodt, as developed in his 2010 book, *The Promise of Salvation*. How does my account differ from his? My definition of religion makes only minor adjustments to his, and so “my” definition might rightly also be said to be “Riesebrodt’s definition.” I do steer the framing and development of my theory away from his resolutely Weberian approach into a more clearly critical realist one. My definition combines what Riesebrodt separates analytically into the three separate steps of “defining,” “understanding,” and “explaining” religion.¹⁹ I also adjust his definition by adding the phrase “align themselves with” to better account for religions lacking personal gods (about which more below). I may not subscribe to the details of his account of the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of religion.²⁰ And my book overall focuses much more on what Riesebrodt calls “religiousness” than on religion itself. But I do not fundamentally disagree with any of Riesebrodt’s thinking in his book, as I understand it; I rather wish to affirm, develop, and extend it.

That said, I do believe that Riesebrodt partly undermines his own project by two key terminological decisions worth mentioning. The first is his emphasis on the word “salvation,” highlighted in the title of the book. This accent on salvation is odd, since Riesebrodt’s theory seeks to be universal and his evidence and illustrations include Western and Eastern references, while the word “salvation” is closely associated with the Christian religion. Also, “salvation,” for many, carries the connotation of eternal life in heaven, with life after death, not the more mundane affairs that Riesebrodt notes religions often concern. Having worked to develop a universal account of religion, why would Riesebrodt foreground a concept that seems partial and particular? I do not know. This cannot be blamed on the translation of his book from German to English, since the word in the original title, *heilsversprechen*, actually means “promise of salvation.” To be fair, Riesebrodt’s working definition of the concept of salvation is extremely broad. In his

19. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 71–91.

20. *Ibid.* Pp. 170–174.

analysis, the term refers to something general like “preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss,” not the specifically Christian understanding of “rescue by God from sin and its consequences.”²¹ He also explicitly notes—although very late in the book and rather off-handedly—that “salvation” can be both “temporary” (temporal, relating to this world) and “eternal.”²² But however broadly one uses the term “salvation” in a theory of religion, in my view one cannot escape the particularly Christian meanings with which it is fraught. I therefore avoid the word salvation in this book and rely instead on the more general term “deliverance,” which is also prominent in Riesebrodt, and should be less problematic, even if not perfect.

Similarly, Riesebrodt likes to describe religious practices as “liturgies.” I understand his meaning and the useful connotations that term conveys. However, given the strong associations of the word “liturgy” with the worship styles of Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians, I think it best to avoid use of that term as well. Also, in this book I use the words “belief” and “beliefs” rather than “faith” to denote the ideas or premises about superhuman powers that help to make sense of religious practices. That is because the word faith too is freighted with associations with particular religious traditions—especially Christianity, and more particularly evangelical Protestantism—to serve as a useful term in discussing religion generally. At a time when the North Atlantic-centered world of social scientific study of religion needs to go global,²³ it seems advisable to use the more generic word belief instead of faith.²⁴

My discussion of religion in this book focuses on what the vast majority of religions in the past and present have been and are like now, not on what

21. Ibid. On p. 89, he equates “the promise of salvation” with “the ability to avert misfortune, overcome crises, and provide salvation.”

22. Ibid. P. 148.

23. David Smilde and Matthew May. 2015. “Causality, Normativity, and Diversity in 40 Years of U.S. Sociology of Religion.” *Sociology of Religion*. 76, 4: 369–388.

24. By “beliefs” here I do not mean the professions of Western religious confessional systems. I mean, more generally, premises or propositions that people consciously or tacitly regard to be true—more precisely, mental attitudes of a certain kind directed toward premises or propositions that are taken to be true. Humans universally have and use beliefs of this kind in most of their activities, including the practicing of religion (see Smith. *To Flourish or Destruct*. Pp. 69–70; Lynne Baker. 1987. *Saving Belief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press). However, specific studies of religious traditions for which the concept of “faith” is indigenously “theologically” appropriate certainly ought to use that term in their analyses, since the character of science should always be driven by the nature of the subject being studied.

religion could or should be. My definition of religion also centers on “culturally prescribed religious practices,” rather than people as religious practitioners and what they may or may not believe, including how much they embrace or dissent from their religious traditions. This tilt toward practices that are prescribed by cultural traditions—rather than religious people’s thoughts and feelings about their religions, including their critical, alienated, and dissenting positions—is, I believe, justified. I realize, however, that it may seem to be biased toward the status quo, established orthodoxies, and authorities who have the power to determine “correct” practices and, therefore, who is in and out, acceptable or not. So I want to be clear that this book’s theory need not privilege the religiously official and powerful. When understood and deployed well, it actually provides helpful tools for those who wish to critique established authorities and traditions. The theory situates observers to explore questions like these: Who “owns” religious cultures and traditions and why? How is religious authority maintained, perhaps even at the expense of religious ethics? Where are boundaries of religious unacceptability and therefore exclusion drawn, why there, and how do they change over time? When and why might dissent from or transgression of dominant religious practices actually become a religious practice itself? How do religious communities negotiate dissonances between their official prescriptions and subjective dispositions of practitioners when the latter disagree with or do not fit easily into official standards? In short, how do power, authority, continuity, voice, inclusion, exclusion, alienation, critique, transgression, and dissent work in religions in the real world?²⁵ Those are not the obvious or primary questions shaping this book’s theory, but the theory nonetheless can assist those with experiences, outlooks, and interests that raise such questions, as I hope will become clear as the book’s argument unfolds.

I do not in this book jump into debates that have been churning in religious studies and anthropology for years about whether “religion” is a real entity or is something like the construction of modern, Western

25. For examples in my own field, see Korie L. Edwards. 2008. *The Elusive Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press; Tricia Bruce. 2011. *Faithful Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press; Milagros Peña. 2007. *Latina Activists across Borders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Irene Sevcik, Michael Rothery, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Robert Pynn. 2015. *Overcoming Conflicting Loyalties*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press; Anson Shupe. 1998. *Wolves within the Fold*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Kelly Chong. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

colonizers.²⁶ My position follows Martin Riesebrodt's, explained deftly in his book, and I see no point in repeating it here.²⁷ Kevin Schilbrack's smart critical realist intervention in this debate I also embrace, as well as Tom Tweed's response to this issue.²⁸ As far as I am concerned, Riesebrodt, Schilbrack, and Tweed have gotten it right, by showing that the post-colonial critics may be largely correct, insofar as it goes, when it comes to religion as a *concept*, but that this does not negate the fact that humans have been *practicing* something real and identifiable that we call religion for countless millennia. We have learned much from the post-colonial critics, but their case has not dissolved the subject of religion.²⁹

This book offers a social scientific account of religion (what anthropologists call an "etic" approach) that tries to take seriously the "insider" or "native" beliefs, categories, and meanings of religious traditions and people (what is called an "emic" approach) without being bound by them.³⁰ The

26. Michael Lambek. 2015. "What Is 'Religion' for Anthropology? And What Has Anthropology Brought to 'Religion'?" In Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek (eds.). *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell. Pp. 1–32; Russell McCutcheon. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press; Timothy Fitzgerald. 1999. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press; Tomoko Masuzawa. 2012. *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Brent Nongbri. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Jason Ananda Josephson. 2012. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Winifred Sullivan. 2012. SSRC. "The World that *Smith* Made." <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/03/07/the-world-that-smith-made/>.

27. Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 1–70.

28. Kevin Schilbrack. 2010. "Religions: Are There Any?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 78: 1112–1138; Schilbrack. 2012. "The Social Construction of 'Religion' and Its Limits." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. 24: 97–117; Schilbrack. 2005. "Religion, Models of, and Reality." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 73: 429–52; Schilbrack. 2013. "After We Deconstruct 'Religion,' Then What? A Case for Critical Realism." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. 25, 1: 107–12; Thomas Tweed. 2008. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

29. I am also not directly engaging the dispute about whether religion scholars need be "caretakers" or "critics" of religion, as a recent debate has framed the matter (the correct answer is "neither"). See Russell McCutcheon. 2001. *Critics Not Caretakers*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Atalia Omer. 2011. "Can a Critic Be a Caretaker Too?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 79: 459–496.

30. Marvin Harris. 1976. "History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 5: 329–350; Kenneth Pike (ed.). 1967. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior*. The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton de Gruyter; Russell McCutcheon. 1999. *Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*. London: Cassell. If the first-order, emic perspective was sufficient to fully describe and explain social life—that is, if reality was so transparent to all of the actors involved in every condition and situation that their self-reports could articulate adequate explanations for those conditions and situations—then there

latter perspective (emic) concerns how reality is viewed and explained within the social group being studied; the former (etic) concerns how outsiders, like social scientists, define, categorize, understand, and explain the same social group using different, scholarly, “non-native” terminology and explanations. Taking an etic approach without discounting the emic sometimes involves switching between the two perspectives and navigating tricky tensions. One difficulty arises in adopting particular religious terms—such as “blessings” and “deliverance”—for use in general theory, without inadvertently dragging along the associated “baggage” from their original religious uses.³¹ When scholars redefine through stipulation a “first-order” religious term for scholarly, “second-order” purposes, confusions can result. Yet scholars cannot invent entirely new, abstract conceptual vocabularies that are “untainted” by any first-order religious meanings by virtue of having no semantic connection to them. So we live in the tensions as best we can. Another problem is that religious people (the emic account) may disagree with social scientific interpretations of them (the etic account), setting up conflicts in views about what is “really” going on in religion and who has the correct perspective to see and know it. This book takes a primarily etic perspective, although it draws terms and provides examples from emic religious perspectives. Keeping in mind the emic/etic distinction will help this book’s argument make more sense.

Finally, nothing in this book either directly endorses or invalidates the truth claims of any religious tradition. This book focuses on the human side

would be no need for any second-order social science or theory; the recording of first-order accounts would do. But the emic perspective is actually often limited and sometimes blurred if not mistaken, requiring an etic account adequately to understand and explain social life, even, sometimes, for the actors involved themselves. Doing this well is part of the responsibility and promise of the social sciences.

31. For example, my reservations about Riesebrodt’s use of “salvation” and “liturgies.” “Only an interpretive, that is, meaning-oriented theory of action, is capable of bridging the gap between religious internal perspectives and scientific external perspectives. Explanations that adopt external perspectives have to justify the outside point of view they adopt. In contrast, interpretive explanations arrive at their external perspectives by abstracting and systematizing internal perspectives. . . . They transform internal perspectives into an external perspective, which is different from the internal perspective but does not contradict them. . . . If we systematize the self-images that religions produce, we see that they contain a sufficient foundation for explaining religion in general. They illuminate the institutionalized meaning of religious practices and allow us to conclude that although this meaning is not identical with the meanings that practitioners attribute to their actions, it nonetheless corresponds to it. . . . Thus the sociological interpretation of meaning represents an abstraction and selective systematization of concrete cultural meanings, but not a break with them.” Riesebrodt. *Promise of Salvation*. Pp. 71, 72, 89.

of religion, its nature and workings. The social sciences are constitutionally incompetent to make judgments about religion's metaphysical claims about superhuman powers.³² Empirical social scientific research sometimes does

32. See Douglas Porpora. 2006. "Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism, and Religious Experience." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. 36: 57–75. My general approach here is one of "compatibilism," a term that usually describes a position in the philosophical debate about human free will, which claims that determinism and free will are compatible. I am borrowing the word for the present discussion. Compatibilism here means that, in principle, genuinely different perspectives on religion—religious and social scientific—may very well be compatible or congruent with each other (though they are not necessarily). Alternative accounts need not be playing a zero-sum game, in which the more right one is, the more wrong the other must be. Instead, different types of accounts of religion might be taking different perspectives on the same subject, which are each valid, as far as they go, but also limited in what they can describe. With properly developed minds able to navigate the complexities of multiple, divergent perspectives on the same subject, we should be able to see how those perspectives provide insights that may be true to reality even if they are not identical with each other. And no matter which may be the thinker's own primary perspective, we should be able to learn from others. Religious practitioners may privilege the accounts of their own religious traditions, but they should also be able to learn from social scientists. And vice versa. Compatibilism does not guarantee or even argue that all perspectives and accounts are equally valid. Human knowledge is fallible and limited. Some claims may be wrong. Yet compatibilism is not really about judging the truth or falsehood of positions, but rather of their possible congruence. The compatibilist approach merely says that in principle, different, seemingly conflicting accounts may actually be true and able to stand together.

The viewpoints of the social sciences are constitutionally limited to making claims based on purportedly reliable empirical evidence and on retroductive and abductive theoretical inferences related to that evidence. Religious truth claims, by contrast, are usually based on different standards of evidence, such as purported divine revelation, historical tradition, mystical experiences, and personal enlightenment. The trouble is that what counts as authoritative evidence for any particular community of knowledge, practice, and discourse (scientific or religious) is particular to that community. Social scientists cannot be persuaded to claim anything as true based on the Jewish Bible or Qur'an, for instance. Likewise, many religious Jews and Muslims will not be convinced about the final truth of reality by analyses of empirical survey data and interviews. Compatibilism helps to mediate such differences. Social science and religion usually have two different purposes and types of authoritative evidence to which they appeal. They are rarely in direct competition. Each may be right or wrong in different ways. But rarely is one able to judge the validity of the other based on its own standards of evidence. Empirical social scientific evidence could never tell us if a transcendent God or Brahman exists as absolute reality, for example. Nor could scripture or mystical experience tell us much about the social processes by which people, say, undergo religious conversions or religious organizations suffer decline. The two simply have different interests, focuses of concern, and standards of judgment (see Christian Smith. 2016. "Why Scientists Playing Amateur Atheology Fail." *Christian Scholars Review*. 47). So they need not conflict.

The critical realism framing my argument in this book helps to explain why compatibilism makes sense, by observing that reality is differentiated, stratified, and complex, entailing complexities of "levels" of the real that each operate according to their own principles and mechanisms. Nearly everything in reality operates in "open systems" in which often overwhelmingly

hold implications for and can pose profitable questions and sometimes disturbing challenges to religious traditions. And social and natural science are capable of (in)validating some specific, empirically falsifiable claims made by religious actors, as when faith healers claim miraculously to cure diseases through prayer. But in general, the social sciences properly take an agnostic, or better yet, uninterested and disinterested, view of the veracity of the metaphysical and theological truth claims of religions, however important and interesting they may be in and of themselves.³³

complex combinations of causal forces shape outcomes, including from “below” through emergence and “above” through downward causation. Furthermore, critical realism rejects philosophical materialism and empiricism, affirming instead that some very important aspects of reality are immaterial (e.g., motivations, values, light waves, etc.) and that much of what matters in reality cannot be accessed by direct empirical observation (e.g., causes, emotions, beliefs, etc.). That is true, critical realism observes, whether or not any religious claims are correct. But if that is true, then at least some religious claims come to be less alien to the reality that science studies. Critical realism and its meta-theoretical frame of thinking are thus compatible with atheism but also with many religious truth claims—in ways that positivist empiricism, for instance, is not. Because reality is highly differentiated and complex, it requires distinct sciences to focus on different aspects of reality, “cutting nature at its joints,” to quote Aristotle, according to how those aspects seem to work in constitution (ontology) and operation (causality) at particular levels. That can range from subatomic particle physics to political science to cosmology. Critical realism also recognizes that the human quest to know as much as we can about reality is good and valuable. So whenever humans believe they have discovered some feature of reality that is not yet adequately understood, critical realism says to think hard about which tools and methods will best describe and explain that piece of reality, given its particular nature. The method is always determined by the subject of study, not vice versa. There is no singular “Scientific Method,” but many methods that all seek to be most true and adequate to their subjects of study. In short, the human quest for greater knowledge about reality should be characterized by a wide-open, ever-learning pluralism of interests and methods.

33. To be clear, however, I am not here advocating a version of Steven Jay Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” (aka NOMA), which says that science and religion represent entirely different kinds of inquiry, with science being in charge of *facts* and religion in charge of *values*, such that no conflict should ever arise between them (Gould. 2002. *Rocks of Ages*. New York: Ballantine Books). Gould’s thinking was headed in the right direction, but did not get it quite right. Religion is not only interested in “values,” but also facts (Francis Collins. 2007. *The Language of God*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Pp. 95, 165). Values ultimately are also always based on facts, as critical realism sees it, even if they are different kinds of entities than facts (Smith. *What Is a Person?* Pp. 386–399). Similarly, science is not just about facts; it presupposes and has implications for a host of values, such as truth, creativity, simplicity, persuasion, etc. (Imagine a science that is truly “value neutral” about the moral commitment to truth!) A better position would be to acknowledge that science and religion both have to do with facts *and* values, and to distinguish between the two in other ways. In compatibilism, the difference is *not* that science and religion “own” or are responsible for dissimilar *types of things* (facts versus values), but rather that they have *qualitatively distinct interests, questions, and standards of knowledge* with regard to sometimes the *same* objects of study (religion, in our case).