

Thoughts on reframing & reclaiming the term "religion"

21st century seekers who explore the Quaker way frequently run up against the "science versus religion" conundrum. It's easy to get sidetracked by this, because we live in an age that defines science and religion as separate worldviews and tends to argue for them as if they were mutually exclusive.

We have discussed the peril of letting ego define categories and draw boundaries as it defends its story about who we are. "We need a sense of self, of course, in order to function at all. But we do not know ourselves thoroughly, so any self-image we devise—or take over from others—will be highly selective." (Ambler 24)

One dimension of our self-images has to do with our world views. If we experience science and religion as opposing world views, this can be a huge language barrier for groups trying to share the Quaker way. How can we set aside that barrier without forcing choices among differing world views?

Some history

What we now call "modern" or "empirical" science was coming into its own in Europe in the mid-16th century, around the same time as the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation.

In 1543, Copernicus used systematic astronomical observations and mathematics to demonstrate that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of our system of planets. Galileo and others embraced this new approach to learning: the use of replicable, measurable observations, to figure out how things work in the material world.

This notion of the *authority of phenomena* ¹ worked its way back into the realm of religious faith and practice, challenging the exclusive authority of the church to describe what is real. Until then, both church and state had supported the classical view of an earth-centered universe. However, the real issue was not the scientific theories themselves, but the question of who had authority to declare what was true.

As we have learned, the central crisis for the Christian world of the 16th and 17th centuries was people's demand that certainty about "what is true" arise directly from their personal experience, rather than from systems of belief that were taught—and often enforced—by church and political authorities.

Unfortunately, what began as an expansion of religious awareness degenerated by the 19th century in to a debate over which was true, science or religion. By the early 20th century, this controversy hardened, in its most extreme forms, into mutually exclusive views of reality: the polar opposites of "scientific atheism" and "religious fundamentalism." The vast global crises of our era are in part due to this loss of a unified world view.

Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*

Dr. Brent Nongbri ² challenges use of the term "religion" in its usual sense. He argues that the notion of religion as a cultural phenomenon separate from others (such as politics or commerce) is a modern one. This changed notion came into use in the 17th century as part of the scientific revolution.

Western thinkers began to describe the practices, mythologies, and sacred texts of cultures using quasi-scientific categories that were based on their conceptualization Christianity. These scholars expected all cultures to have religions, and all religions to have the same categories. The error here is that such thinkers looked for cultural ingredients they could squeeze into their readymade categories and then called the result a "religion." ³

Europe's thought also changed drastically with regard to the *place* of religion in society. Driving this was the shift in the nature of governance. During the religious wars of that era, princes and leaders increasingly embraced the notion of religion as separate from politics. Religion came to be viewed as a

stand-alone phenomenon, a strictly a private matter, perhaps shared by groups of believers, but separate from the secular reality of a culture.

This was the beginning of the separation and eventual opposition of science and religion. In the natural way of all humans, we mistake the categories we have learned or created for actual descriptions of reality, rather than remembering that they are artificial boundaries, marking out patterns which our cultures and our own beliefs have seduced our brains into "seeing."

What Nongbri wants us to be able to do is to see the phenomena themselves, to lay aside our categories so that we can see how other people, other cultures, organize their own narratives of interaction with the sacred. What would happen if we let go of "religion" as a descriptive category for something we can either embrace or reject?

James P. Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief*

James P. Carse ⁴ takes a different approach. Carse wants to reclaim the term "religion" as one that refers, not to what people say they believe or are told to believe, but to what they seek, what draws them to join together in caring fellowship with one another. This is closer to the Quaker understanding of religion. The word "religion" comes from the Latin *re* + *ligere*, "to bind together."

Carse analyses an error he sees in most of our arguments over religion: "What is currently criticized as religion is, in fact, the territory of belief" (book jacket). The distinction, as he defines it, is enlightening.

Belief systems are "comprehensive networks of tenets that reach into every area of thought and action." (32) They claim to define all that needs to be known, they mark the boundary beyond which orthodox thinking must not go, and they name anything and anyone beyond that boundary as enemy.

Religions may produce belief systems, yet "they are not at their core intelligible, and they are saturated with paradox." (36) Unlike the Roman *civitas*, a society ruled by law and structured by clear lines of authority, a religion is a *communitas* stretching across time and space, a "spontaneous gathering of persons who identify themselves and one another as members of a unified body." Unified, Carse writes, by "the desire...to get to the bottom of the very mystery that brings them together." (84)

Carse points out that while belief systems are characterized by *boundaries*, religions are characterized by *horizons*. However much members of *communitas* may help each other to extend their "common field of vision," they always acknowledge that there is more to their mystery than they can possibly know beyond the horizon. (107)

Using Carse's (re)definition of "religion," it is possible, for example, to talk about empirical science as the religion of people who find knowledge and meaning in their exploration of and awe over the complexities of the natural world. It is possible to talk about people who use traditionally religious language, not as folks who demand adherence to systems belief but, rather, folks who use sacred storytelling and theater to point to knowledge and meaning that cannot be expressed in words or described by empirical analyses.

Queries

1. How might we become able to see theistic Judaism or non-theistic Buddhism or compassionate atheism or humane science as each being a "religion" that draws its followers together in their respective realms of faith and practice?
2. Using Carse's definition and Nongbri's advice to set aside our usual categories, how might you describe your own "religion" to others?

Notes

¹ See "The Rise of Modern Science: The Authority of Phenomena," by L. Pierce Williams (2000; updated 2017), from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* at www.britannica.com/science/history-of-science/The-rise-of-modern-science.

² *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300216783/religion by Brent Nongbri (2013).

- See a review at universalistfriends.org/weblog/brent-nongbri-s-critique-of-the-concept-religion
- See added commentary at universalistfriends.org/weblog/after-religion-thoughts-on-brent-nongbri-s-before-religion.

³ An extreme example is the first European description of "the religion of India" in 1630 by Henry Lord, an Anglican chaplain with the British East India Company. Lord lumped together *all* the cultic practices, superhuman beings, and holy texts of the Indian subcontinent under one heading as *the* "Indian religion" (eventually misnamed "Hinduism"). Having done this, he tried to fill in the predefined categories of Christian colonialists.

⁴ *The Religious Case Against Belief* www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/302326/the-religious-case-against-belief-by-james-p-carse/9780143115441 by James P. Carse (2008).