Wittgenstein and Ascriptions of "Religion"

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Abstract: Recent years have seen an increasing amount of studies of the history of the term "religion" and how it figures in conceptions of "the secular" and of cultural differences generally. A recurrent theme in these studies is that "religion" carries associations with Protestant Christianity and thus is not as universal a category as it might appear. The aim of this paper is to explore some resources in Wittgenstein's philosophy to obtain greater clarity about the contexts of ascription of religion-status to various phenomena and thus to gain perspective on claims made by scholars who investigate the genealogy of the term. While there is good reason to be circumspect about uncritical use of the term "religion" (no less in philosophizing about religions or conducting interreligious dialogue), I argue that instead of abandoning the term or proffering a critical theory of religion, investigation of ascriptions of religion will help philosophers to perceive more clearly the social dynamics that have led to someone or thing being called religious and thus avoid equivocations that could obstruct the ends of philosophical inquiry or dialogue.

A precondition for participation in an interreligious encounter is that participants are in some sense religious. This much is obvious, but *how* someone or something qualifies as religious is not always clear.[1] For this, criteria are needed that will help pick out those persons, practices, or institutions that are religious as opposed to non-religious. We may have some contexts where common-sense is good enough to identify who the religious persons or communities are, but even so, globalization, immigration, varying legal systems, and the ongoing appearance of new candidates for religion-status (what are sometimes called new religious movements) raise problematic questions about what is or is not a religion and thus for who the potential interlocutors are in interreligious communication. These problems are all the more complicated in places, like China, where religions are managed by the state and labeling something a religion has extensive political, cultural, and legal consequences. For these reasons, getting a bearing on the application of the term "religion", and especially what I call in this essay "ascriptions of religion"[2] (i.e. the acts of naming or otherwise identifying something as a religion, along with the varying criteria for religion-status and the contexts in which these criteria operate) will be important for avoiding confusion and removing perplexity about religious diversity and interreligious encounters.

Recent years have seen an increasing amount of studies of the history of the term "religion" and how it figures in conceptions of "the secular" and of cultural differences generally. A recurrent theme in these studies is that "religion" carries associations with Protestant Christianity and thus is not as universal a category as it might appear. The aim of this paper is to explore some resources in Wittgenstein's philosophy to obtain greater clarity

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[1] While "common-sense" notions of religiosity may be adequate for identifying some cases of interreligious communication, because of a lack of clarity surrounding the extension of terms like "religion" and "religious", relying on common-sense alone may result in other cases being excluded or erroneous instances being included among cases of interreligious communication (e.g. with respect to borderline situations, for which common-sense does not provide a guide).

[2] I borrow this expression from Kevin Schilbrack (2010, p. 1122).

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someone or thing being called religious and thus avoid equivocations that could obstruct the

ends of philosophical inquiry or dialogue.

1. Critical Studies of "Religion"

When considering the social contexts in which religion-status is ascribed, one might

expect to find a variety. Some of these contexts include legal, political, economic,

institutional, and academic discourses, and they may overlap or otherwise influence one

another. A danger which Wittgenstein and numerous Wittgensteinian philosophers have

pointed out is the risk, even the temptation, to unknowingly equivocate across contexts of use

(e.g. when conducting "arm chair" conceptual analysis). In fact, this is much of the

philosophical value of conceptual genealogy.[3] It is easy to see how this tendency to conflate

might operate for terms like "meaning" (e.g. as sense or reference) or "truth" (e.g. as

predication of semantic ascent or expression or of heartfelt personal value), but the tendency

appears also with other terms, such as "religion," that are deeply important to human

experience. We may be inclined to say that the diverse uses of "religion" possess a family

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[3] A risk in using genealogy in a philosophical examination of a concept is that a scholar may commit a genetic fallacy. For this reason, it is important to conceive of genealogy as an additional way of investigating the meanings of a term, some of which may be quite distant from contemporary meanings. At times, the lineage of a term may be helpful for resolving philosophical problems concerning the term. For more on this use of genealogy in conceptual analysis, see Carroll 2008 and 2014.

resemblance. But what exactly does that mean? In order to answer this question, and again following Wittgenstein[4], it will be necessary to look and see how "religion" is used.

a. Sketching the Uses of "Religion"

Given the wide variety of contexts of ascription, it would be very difficult in an essay of this length to offer a complete overview of the uses of "religion". Instead, what is possible are glimpses into some of these contexts where the term may be defined or where a definition may be implied. These instances paint a picture and suggest a trajectory of the term through intellectual history up to the present. Drawing on varying sources[5] for investigating the uses of the term, here are several approaches to defining "religion" or identifying religions:

(1) "Action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods, or similar superhuman power; the performance of religious rites or observances…A particular system of faith and worship…A pursuit, interest, or movement, followed with great devotion…Belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement." (OED 2015)

(2) "Religious faith and religious sentiment, along with religious ceremonies and organizations consonant with this faith and sentiment, are all products of the history

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[4] In this respect, I take a lead from Wittgenstein's remark: "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." (Wittgenstein 2003, 20) Conceptual investigation would then proceed by examining the actual uses of a word in language, an activity that could be aided by genealogical investigations of the term.

[5] These sources include dictionaries, legal and governmental documents, academic discourse, intra-traditional discourse, documents of international organizations, and educational institutions. This method is inspired by that used by Stanley Cavell in his inquiry into criteria in *The Claim of Reason*. See especially Cavell 1979, pp. 8-9.

of society. The earliest emergence of the religious mentality reflected the low level of production and the sense of awe toward natural phenomena of primitive peoples. With the evolution of class society, the most profound social roots of the existence and development of religion lay in the following factors: the helplessness of the people in the face of the blind forces alienating and controlling them in this kind of society; the fear and despair of the workers in the face of the enormous misery generated by the oppressive social system; and in the need of the oppressor classes to use religion as an opiate and as an important and vital means in its control of the masses. In Socialist society, the class root or the existence of religion was virtually lost following the elimination of the oppressive system and its oppressor class. However, because the people's consciousness lags behind social realities, old thinking and habits cannot be thoroughly wiped out in a short period."[6] (MacInnis 1989, 8)

(3) "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." (U.S. Constitution, Article 1)

(4) "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (The United Nations 1948)

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[6] See "Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint on the Religion Question During Our Country's Socialist Period" (1982) translated in Donald E. MacInnis, 1989. *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, pp. 8-26.

(5) "Churches and religious organizations, like many other charitable organizations, qualify for exemption from federal income tax under IRC Section 501(c)(3) and are generally eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. To qualify for tax-exempt status, the organization must meet the following requirements (covered in greater detail throughout this publication): the organization must be organized and operated exclusively for religious, educational, scientific or other charitable purposes; net earnings may not inure to the benefit of any private individual or shareholder; no substantial part of its activity may be attempting to influence legislation; the organization may not intervene in political campaigns; and the organization's purposes and activities may not be illegal or violate fundamental public policy." (Department of the Treasury 2015)

(6) "[T]he past century and a half of religious studies scholarship has been marked by numerous and repeated undertakings to define religion—that is, to identify its fundamental or core element. From Immanuel Kant (yes, even Rene Descartes) forward, the intellectual tradition is characterized by a series of methodological attempts to isolate a sine qua non (or a first principle) for religion, an element that is sometimes referred to as a religious a priori. Accordingly, the methods of these researchers and interpreters have been tailored to reduce all qualities, characteristics, and aspects of religion to those core elements that are understood to be absolutely fundamental…Whether the fundamental core element be Kant's moral imperative, Friedrich Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence,' or Rudolf Otto's 'the numinous,' the isolated first principle in each instance is regarded as 'that without which religion would not be what it truly is.'" (Capps 1995, xviii)

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

(8) "The pattern which I put forward is primarily directed towards what traditionally in English are called religions...But the schema also applies to worldviews other than religious ones. The schema has a double purpose. One is to provide a realistic checklist of aspects of a religion so that a description of that religion or a theory about it is not lopsided...The other [purpose] is to give a kind of functional delineation of religions in lieu of a strict definition."[7] (Smart 1999, 8-9)

(9) "'Religion' in the singular, as just one thing, is nowhere to be found; it is too maddeningly polyvalent and too uncontainably diverse for us to fit it all under one roof. There are Western religions, Eastern religions, ancient religions, modern religions, monotheistic, polytheistic, and even slightly atheistic religions; too many to count, too many to master, in too many languages to learn…Indeed the uncontainable diversity of 'religion' is itself a great religious truth and a marker of the uncontainability of what religion is all about." (Caputo 2001, 1)

(10) "The modern concept of religion is Western in origin. If you look up the word religion in a Chinese dictionary, you will find it translated as *zongjiao*, which comes from the Japanese *shūkyō*. But neither term is native to Asia: the Japanese word was

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[7] The dimensions of religions that Smart indicates in *Dimensions of the Sacred* are: "1. The ritual or practical dimension… 2. The doctrinal or philosophical dimension… 3. The mythic or narrative dimension… The experiential or emotional dimension… 5. The ethical or legal dimensions… 6. The organizational or social component… 7. The material or artistic dimension…." To these, Smart also adds two more dimensions: the political and the economic. (Smart 1999, 10-11)

actually translated from the German *Religionsübung*. Of course, both Chinese and

Japanese already had words resembling religion before they decided to copy a

German one, but the fact that someone felt that a new word was required suggests

that the transformation of the idea was fairly fundamental. This is not simply a

problem of terminology: some have argued that the Western concept of religion (for

example, as scholars, governments, and human rights campaigners employ it) refers

not merely to Christianity, but a particular kind of Christianity, the post-

Enlightenment interpretation of faith as a personal dialogue with God. Thus when

scholars try to compare religions (for example, by teaching a course in world

religions), they are implicitly comparing other religions against a Christian standard,

one that would consequently make non-Western religions look either incomplete or

primitive." (DuBois 2011, 4f)

Here, one sees a recurrence of themes such as religions as the free expression of conscience

or belief (1-4); the idea that religious practices follow from beliefs (1, 2, 4); and the social

value of toleration of varying (including deviant or obsolete) beliefs, practices, or traditions

so long as they do not harm others (2-5). Scholars represent religion as something that can be

defined (6, 7) or not (8, 9, and possibly 10). It is noteworthy that, with the exceptions of the

academic discourses (especially 7-10), religion is defined or identified in ways consistent

with recent conceptual genealogies of religion; even in Document 19 of the Chinese

Community Party (2), religion is conceived in a way that reflects salient themes in Protestant

Christianity (especially in its focus on faith and sentiment as the core of religiosity, which

ceremonies and institutions are held to develop from). Increasingly, worry over the

application of "religion" appears in the work of scholars performing genealogical study of the

concept, something to which (10) refers. What is notable when comparing all ten passages on

"religion" is the apparent confidence of (1-5) in the straightforward applicability of the term to phenomena and the general distance between governmental and scholarly conceptions of religion. Indeed, the trajectory one sees in (6) - (10) is one of growing reticence over the academic adequacy of a pre-theoretical concept of religion. On the basis of these observations, care over the use of "religion" in appraising cultural differences would be warranted, but when one further takes into consideration genealogical research on the term, this care is all the more helpful to avoid confusion.

b. Tracing the Genealogy of "Religion"

Conceptual genealogy, memorably invoked by Nietzsche, holds the promise of revealing the contours of history and power in languages, contours that may otherwise be obscured from view in the everyday flow of language use. While Nietzsche is important in inspiring conceptual genealogical work, Wittgenstein's philosophy is, to my mind, even more helpful in conducting such work. Not only does his focus on language having meaning in the circumstances of social life draw attention to the embeddedness of concepts in social and historical contexts, but this very same emphasis also suggests that if one wants to understand the language of another place or time, one would do well to understand the social and historical contexts in which that language figures. In this way, conceptual genealogy could be part of the work of identifying nuances of difference of meaning or of suggesting family resemblances between otherwise disparate instances of language (i.e. conceptual analysis or investigation). Thus, I approach critical studies of "religion" as helpful resources for clarifying the roles the concept of religion has played in thinking about cultural, intellectual, ethical, and political differences among human beings.

Conceptual genealogies of "religion" have been advanced by scholars such as Talal

Asad (1993) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005). Over the last two decades, a growing number of

scholars have been exploring the genealogy of the term "religion". These studies frequently

trace the emergence of the term in early-modern European Christian thought and subsequent

use in identifying "world religions" during periods of expanding political influence of

European empires (Masuzawa 2005 and Nongbri 2013). While the term might appear to be

culturally and politically neutral with respect to the phenomena collected underneath it,

historical investigation reveals a different story. The tendency of the concept to privilege

aspects of religiosity, such as private belief, personal faith, congregational membership,

textual sources of religious teaching and authority, and separation from the political is what

these scholars have in mind. For example, in China and Japan the term was introduced under

political and military duress as part of an agenda by Western nations to expand Christian

missionary activities where such initiatives had been previously opposed (Josephson 2012,

1). One effect of these genealogical studies is to undermine the sense that "religion" is a

transhistorical, univocal category and thus the confidence that it refers to a natural kind;

ascriptions of religion-status are not straightforward, as with concepts bearing universal

criteria.

In response to concerns that religious studies scholars inadvertently projected features

distinctive of Protestant Christianity onto other traditions, some scholars, such as Ninian

Smart ((8), above), argue for an expansion of the category to account for a wide diversity of

phenomena that these things called religions happen to possess. Thus Smart recommends an

expanding series of dimensions of religiosity, none of which should be taken as definitive of

religion. Smart's approach has been very influential, but as any introductory level faculty

member could observe, this theoretically-rich conception of religion is not coextensive with

the native concepts of religion most students bring to the classroom. A frequent contention made in connection with these studies is that while some theorists have sought to expand the meaning of "religion" to include traditions around the world, the term ineffaceably retains much of its original connotations of private belief and experience (and the primacy of these factors over other dimensions of religiosity) — phenomena that are prominently featured in Protestant Christianity. While differences of focus divide the work of these historicists, a common theme in this area of scholarship is that "religion" is a relatively modern term that tends to distort what it classifies when applied to temporally distant phenomena (such as ancient practices or traditions)[8] or to culturally distant phenomena (for example, Judaism, Buddhism, or Confucianism)[9]. The upshot of these genealogies of "religion" would then be that to conceive of an encounter as happening between partners of different *religions*, one is at risk of already framing the encounter in a non-neutral way; that is, one may have cast the encounter in a way that tends to favor salient qualities of Protestant Christianity (despite the best intentions of scholars) and that requires participants to embrace these qualities in order to join, for example, in a dialogue. This is the familiar problem of conceptual parochialism.

In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept,* Brent Nongbri presents a conceptual genealogy of "religion" inspired methodologically, in part, by Wittgenstein. Nongbri traces the history of the concept from what he argues are its origins in early modern European Christian thought (particularly in response to the "Wars of Religion") to its common use as a descriptive term inclusive of "world religions". In so doing, he also explores its adequacy as a translation of terms that pre-date it in Latin, Greek, and Arabic.

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[8] See Nongbri 2013.

[9] See Sun 2013.

Regarding the Latin word *"religio,"* Nongbri argues "that the word had a variety of meanings in antiquity and that none of those corresponds to the modern notion of religion or delineates 'religious' from 'secular.'" (Nongbri 2013, 26) Nongbri finds the term *"religio"* in various ancient texts. In Plautus, it refers to "scruples" (27), in Cicero to "rules or prohibitions instituted either by gods or humans" (28), and in Lucretius to "a kind of force malevolent to humanity" (28). Nongbri observes of Latin Christian discourse: "In Christian writings of the third and fourth centuries, the idea of ritual practices is still present in the usage of *religio,* and the plural usage that causes modern translators of Cicero such difficulties persists in Christian writers." (28-29) In the writings of Christians such as Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine, *"religio"* is used to identify Christian worship practices; Nongbri writes, "What is most at issue for these Christian authors is the object of worship—the one, true God or the many gods." (30) In the fifth century, the medieval sense of *religio* referring to monastic life begins to appear (31), especially as one would see in the writings of Thomas Aquinas centuries later. Nongbri continues his genealogy of the Latin *"religio"* up to the cusp of the early modern period (and the writings of John Locke) — where he locates the origin of the contemporary concept of religion — but what is important to see is that the ancient meanings were significantly different from contemporary associations with the term.

Similar lessons can be derived from investigating the Greek word *"thrēskeia,"* frequently used to translate "religion." Nongbri traces the history of *"thrēskeia,"* first appearing in Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E. up through Greek Christian discourses in the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E. As with *"religio,"* the meanings of *"thrēskeia"* evolve and diversify over time. It's range of meanings include "rituals" (Herodotus), "sacrifices" (Philo of Alexandria), "worship" (New Testament), "activities that go on in a

temple or veneration of a god more generally," but also "loyalty" to divine authority

(Josephus), "sacrifice" (Origin), and "worship" (Eusebius). (36)

As for Arabic, despite the occurrence of "religion" in popular English translations of

the Qur'an, Nongbri argues that this is a problematic rendering of the Arabic word "*dīn*."

Examining Nessin Joseph Dawood's 1956 translation, Nongbri indicates that "*dīn*" is also

sometimes translated as "faith," (sometimes in the same sentence). (39) Nongbri contrasts

this with the earliest English translation of the Qur'an by Alexander Ross in 1649, where

Ross uses the word "law" to render "*dīn*". (41) Nongbri compares these translations with the

Encyclopedia of Islam entry on "*dīn*", which "proposes a wide semantic range for the word:

custom, usage, judgment, direction, retribution." (41) Nongbri then observes, "What ties

these terms together is that they refer to social interactions, a far cry from the sort of private,

internal, apolitical sense of 'faith' or 'religion.'" (41f) Similar dynamics play out with respect

to the words "*milla*" and "*umma*," which also occasionally are translated by "religion."

Nongbri's central thesis is that "religion" tends to distort its phenomena when it is

taken to be a human universal (both culturally and temporally). Nongbri traces the

development of "*vera religio*", sometimes translated as "true religion" but which he translates

as "genuine worship". Expressions such as "*vera religio*" indicated that other traditions of

worship were heretical, what would now entail an *intra-traditional* defect and thus not a

distinct tradition. Because of this polemical use of "*religio*", the term indicates not an ancient

or medieval consciousness of religion but rather a tendency to see other traditions as deviant

forms of the speaker's tradition. Indeed, the clarification of defensible differences, which

predates the spread of the concept of religion had to do with differentiating between deviant

claims and reasons within a tradition and those that originate within other traditions (Clayton

2006). What is at stake, in part, in interreligious encounters is recognition and comprehension

in one's otherness. Nongbri demurs at expanding the term beyond its Christian origins to somehow "include" all relevant phenomena around the world that some would say "ought" to fall under the concept; yet, he is not opposed to self-conscious use of the term in "redescription" of phenomena (Nongbri 2013, 158). Nongbri's primary concern is the naive projection of the term on ancient (or even pre-seventeenth century) practices and traditions, where he argues the term is likely to introduce associations alien to its phenomena.

c. Critical Realism about Religion

Some critical theorists on religion (e.g. Russell T. McCutcheon 2003 and Timothy Fitzgerald 2003) argue that on the basis of genealogical studies, the term "religion" cannot be salvaged academically speaking, that the associations of the term with Christianity will tend to distort what it classifies (especially if what it is used to classify is distant from forms of early-modern European Christianity). Thus, these critics of "religion" argue that scholars should employ a different vocabulary that might better do justice to the disparate phenomena otherwise collected together by "religion". I will refer to this view as "eliminativism" about religion (as a parallel to eliminativism in the philosophy of mind).

Kevin Schilbrack argues for a "critical realist" approach to the concept of religion in his recent book, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: a Manifesto*. Schilbrack writes that "Critical realism" is the view that "the concept of 'religion' *is* socially constructed, but religion nevertheless exists, 'out there' in the world." (Schilbrack 2014, 89) Schilbrack argues further for a distinction between the identification and interpretation of something as a religion, wherein only participants can identify themselves or their practices or institutions as religious but others can interpret a phenomenon as religious in contexts beyond that of the term's historical origin. The term "critical realism" originates in the reception of Roy

Bhaskar's critique of eliminativist social constructionism in social science. The idea is that one can accept the interpretive or epistemic value of a concept without claiming that the world really (ontologically) bears those properties predicated of it. Critical realism leaves it as an open question whether the concept really applies to the thing. When applied to the concept of religion, such a view would hold that something may be interpreted as religious without claiming that it really is religious. Critical realists thus aspire to be self-aware of the use of concepts as tools for interpretation to be, perhaps, superseded by different concepts at a later date.

While I broadly agree with much in Schilbrack's general approach to reconstructing the philosophy of religion, there are three dynamics concerning the ascription of religion-status he did not address in the book: new religious movements, societies that accepted the concept of religion under unequal power dynamics, and societies that manage the social expressions of religious phenomena. I am thinking particularly of nations like China where the "religious marketplace" (Yang 2012) is under state management, where "religion" (*zongjiao*) entered the society and language via Japan amidst an unequal power dynamic characterized by colonial or sometimes quasi-colonial circumstances with the West (DuBois 2011), and where new religious movements (and quasi-religious movements) jostle alongside the state-recognized five religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism) (Yang 2012 and Hendriks 2016). Of course, complete religious freedom is perhaps not allowed anywhere there is a state as various ethical and political values curtail or override its unimpeded development. All modern legal frameworks to some extent circumscribe what may or may not be ascribed religion-status in so far as they treat of religions at all (compare with legal theory of religious rights). The point of critical realism is to recognize in the ordinary word "religion" viable academic applications while remaining

circumspect about the ontological value of the term. What is helpful in critical realism is the registering of varying dynamics at play in ascriptions of religion-status. It draws the scholar's self-conscious attention to acts of interpretation and, possibly, to the social and political dynamics of language use; such scrupulousness about the application of an expression is also helpful for avoiding equivocation about the meaning of such a widely used term. While these social and political dynamics might not be important for all concepts, they *are* important for concepts, like religion, so close to conceptions of state authority, the secular, and human rights.

Schilbrack's critical realism would attend to the contexts of ascription of religion. It is unclear whether critical realism would be consistent with Wittgenstein's post-1929 philosophy; after all, it entails a position about the relationship between words and the world that is itself rather univocal. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's remarks on seeing an aspect in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations* ("Philosophy of Psychology - A Fragment") show an appreciation for entertaining multiple perspectives when considering the elements of a philosophical problem. Insofar as there are philosophical problems concerning the application of the concept of religion, flexibility regarding the use and revoking of a category may be helpful. There may be a sort of common cause between Schilbrack's critical realist approach to "religion" and some of Wittgenstein's philosophical methods.

2. Wittgenstein and Contexts of Ascription

In philosophical discourse, analysis of "ascription" arises most frequently in connection with the assigning of propositional attitudes — such as beliefs or desires — to other agents. Beliefs or desires (or other propositional attitudes) are ascribed to agents in order to describe their relationship to particular propositions and thus explain observable

behavior. Thus, the variety of ways in which "belief" or "desire" are used could be

investigated by attending to the contexts of ascription of belief or desire. Ascriptions of

religion concern the saying of something that it "is a religion" or it "is religious". Because of

this overt interpretive connotation, "ascription" is a useful word for considering the acts of

defining "religion" and of assigning religion- or non-religion-status to an object. Accordingly,

religion-status is ascribed to persons, things, or traditions in order to compare them with other

things labeled religious and thus explain observable behavior. In this way, one can approach

the concept of "civil religion" (see Bellah 1970) as a *redescription* of phenomena, an

interpretation that may be more or less hermeneutically illuminating. Yet, there are other

reasons to ascribe religion-status. It may be an honorific (praising the devotion of fans to a

sports team), a pejorative (as in some instances of criticizing Confucianism as a religion[10]), or

a strategy to establish protected status where forms of political contention has not favored the

movement (Falun Gong).

Religion was not a major theme in Wittgenstein's corpus, but one can find some

examples of the ascription of religion-status, particularly in texts he did not prepare to be

published (such as the "Lectures on Religious Belief," "Movements of Thought," and

"Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough"). Because a number of relevant examples appear in the

Lectures, I will turn to these for the purposes of the present essay. The Lectures do not

contain many abstract references to religion, *per se*. Wittgenstein refers to "religious

persons", "religious beliefs" or "religious controversies", but these references occur in

connection with a discussion of belief in "the Last Judgment" (Wittgenstein 1967, 55, 56)

There are a few cases that do seem abstractive and generalizing: "In a religious discourse we

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[10] See, for example, Xiaomei Yang's recounting of the various assessments of "Ru Jiao" by twentieth century
Chinese intellectuals adhering to the principles of the May 4th Movement (Yang 2008, 555) as well as Anna
Sun's history of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese Marxist scholarship on Confucianism (Sun
2013, 80).

use such expressions as 'I believe that so and so will happen,' and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science." (57) Here, Wittgenstein is contrasting "religious discourse" with "scientific discourse". While use of the term "religion" remains still within the context of considering belief in a Last Judgment, the statement is not fully (or unambiguously) abstractive; yet the opposition between it and "science" suggests that one type of human endeavor is being compared with another.

The abstractive use of religion in description is found unambiguously a little later in the first lecture when Wittgenstein considers encountering an island with people whose beliefs "we are inclined to call religious." (58) Of the statements these people make, some would just be sentences and others "religious statements" (58):

> We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious…They have sentences, and there are also religious statements.

> These statements would not just differ in respect to what they are about. Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs, and there can easily be imagined transitions where we wouldn't know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs. (58)

The passage exemplifies what Nongbri and Schilbrack call "redescription". Wittgenstein refers to being "inclined" to call the beliefs religious, that this ascription would be based on "connections" throughout a network of beliefs. Wittgenstein also indicates appreciation that while there would be clear-cut cases of religion- and non-religion-status, there would be examples about which we would not know what to say, what to ascribe.

Following Schilbrack's distinction between identification and interpretation (Schilbrack 2014, 94), there are two general types of ascription of religion: self-ascriptions

and ascriptions done by others. Ascribing is similar to naming in that both indicate a relationship between an object possessing certain properties and a designation. Naming may further be involved with identification of grammatical features of a language-game (as in a guide that one might follow to be able to participate in or at least understand the game). Wittgenstein writes, "What is the relation between a name and the thing named? —Well, what *is* it? Look at language-game (2) or at another one: there you can see the sort of thing that this relation consists in." (Wittgenstein 2003, 18) Of course, ascription, like naming, is a practice that may be likewise inferred from context as much or more than when it is directly observed. Similarly, ascriptions of religion may be involved with identification of grammatical features of a language-game and may seek to indicate similarities (such as with other religions) or differences (such as with non-religions) with other instances of language.

When surveying the shifting meanings of "religion" and the diverse phenomena sometimes grasped under its banner, scholars (Wittgensteinian or otherwise) at junctions like this often invoke the notion of family resemblances (Wittgenstein 2003, 32) to account for the diversity of meanings of "religion". But such an approach would be not so much an account of the diversity of meanings as a placeholder for explanation. (Harrison 2006) It is not clear how the notion of family resemblance helps account for the different contexts of ascription of religion-status. Indeed, Wittgenstein invokes the notion — borrowed from Spengler — to characterize the similarities amidst differences one finds when looking into how language works. But what produces these similarities?

To help illustrate the question, consider somewhat similar problems relating to definitions and theories of art. For a long time in Western aesthetics — as Noël Carroll has described (Carroll 1999) — representational theories of art were dominant (i.e., roughly, the view that artworks have representational content and that this is what makes such objects

artworks). Later, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these theories

were replaced or supplemented by expression theories of art (roughly, the view that the

expression of an artist's particular emotion is what confers art-status on an object). In the

mid-twentieth century, formalism arose as a theory that defines "art" by its structural features

(such as lines, shapes, vectors, rhythm, tones, and so on). Finally, in response to the

recurrence of avant-garde art exceeding the boundaries of old definitions and drawing

inspiration from Wittgenstein, "open concept" approaches to art appeared (e.g. that of Morris

Weitz). Open concept approaches treat "art" as a concept for which one will not find

necessary and sufficient conditions; instead, new candidates for art-status are identified by

means of family resemblances with established artworks. How these resemblances are

determined is a matter of similarities with paradigmatic instances of art or with previously

indicated criteria (such as representation, expression, form); one might think of these as

isomorphic features of the candidates and of the artworks. Open concept approaches to art

were followed by institutional theories (such as George Dickie's), where the "artworld" (e.g.

an artist, a critic, or a gallery curator) confers art-status on an object. The reception of the

candidate for art-status by an institution (the "artworld") is what confers art-status on the

candidate. Institutional approaches have to do with the identification of functional features of

candidates and artworks (institutional), where candidates play a similar social role and are

thus welcomed by the artworld.[11]

Contra Carroll's analysis, it seems to me that both "open concept" and institutional

approaches to understanding the concept of "art" can be interpreted as Wittgensteinian in

spirit. At stake between these different approaches is the question over whether family

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[11] In a similar vein, Victoria Harrison argues that because other vague or difficult to define concepts (e.g. "species" or "mind") are still usefully analyzed in scholarly literature, it does not follow that "religion" should be abandoned because of difficulties surrounding definitions of that term. See especially Harrison (2006, 144-145).

resemblances between candidates for art-status and artworks have to do with similarities between qualities they possess (e.g. representation, expression, or significant form), or whether family resemblances involve historical connections between established works and candidates for art-status (perhaps mediated by institutions). The open concept approach treats art as a human universal where art-status is determined by publicly observable properties, once one has the concept. The institutional approach treats art as a social construction, conferred on an object by someone acting on behalf of the art world (i.e. one who assesses the concept and is recognized by others as plausibly having the requisite judgment). To what extent do these same ways of thinking about family resemblances inform how we should think about hermeneutically useful ascriptions of religion?

A disanalogy with the case of religion occurs because art has family resemblance qualities in part because of the propensities of artists to push the boundaries of prevailing criteria of art and in part because of the conviction of many thinkers and members of the artworld that art is a cultural phenomenon found throughout human history. If "religion" is a family resemblance term, it is in part because people think of it as a cultural universal, but note that, by and large, there is no parallel between the concepts of art and religion when it comes to the impulse to pursue the avant-garde. The world religions and religious pluralism paradigms follow largely functionalist conceptions of the family resemblance of religions (i.e conceptions of paradigmatic qualities of religions are what theorists use to pick out the religions).

Eliminativists about "religion" — those who hold that the term is unsalvageable because of its tendency to pick out properties prominent in Protestant Christianity — embrace a genetic conception of family resemblance of religion (i.e. practices or traditions remote temporally or culturally from early modern Europe do not have a *family* resemblance) and

thus should not be conceptualized as religions. That is, the term is unsalvageable as a universal type instantiated by a variety of tokens. Even so, it might still be useful, even for eliminativists, within Christian discourses.

Critical realists would hold that ascriptions of religion-status would always be answerable to questions of hermeneutical accuracy. Thus, as with ascriptions of art status in the contemporary world, it is possible that particular objects will satisfy some criteria for religion-status while falling short of others. Ascribing religion-status to a thing would be a "redescriptive" practice and would not be final.

3. The Landscapes of Dialogue and Comparison of Religions

While Wittgenstein used the term "religion" without evident concern about its genealogy, his philosophy supports being scrupulous about the universality and hermeneutical adequacy of terms; part of my argument is that this scrupulousness may be aided by attention to a term's genealogy. It may be appropriate to abandon a concept in some situations (i.e. not to force its use); as McCutcheon and Nongbri advise, scholars might set aside "religion" from time to time in favor of different analytical concepts (even if one does so solely for the purpose of hermeneutical freshness — in order to not reify a familiar descriptive category). Even so, adopting a purely genetic conception of family resemblance seems problematic. First, doing so, while preventing the errors of equivocation, would prescribe a starkly conservative approach to language use and the activities of the clarifying philosopher. While such an approach might be admirable in some respects, it would foreclose on the possibility of drawing imaginative connections between historically or culturally distant phenomena or instances of language. Second, Wittgenstein's corpus supports a functionalist reading of family resemblance. This may be supplemented by genealogical

investigation, but to embrace only a genetic approach to conceptual clarification would be to move away from Wittgenstein. Third, insofar as there are social practices that participants identify as religious and that others might interpret as religious, scrupulous, critical use of the term may be helpful. To forego use of the term would be to miss an opportunity for philosophical clarification of that which is inchoate or confused, a key impetus for much of Wittgenstein's philosophical work. As with Schilbrack, I would hold that the term is sometimes useful for indicating similarities or differences among human social practices.

Encounters between religions are encounters between specific people grouped together under a particular conception of religion, by themselves and/or others, for a variety of reasons (including pragmatic, idealistic, and even "religious" reasons)[12] in distinct times and places. Thus, it does not make sense to speak of interreligious dialogue without at the same time spelling out the relevant contextualizing factors. In some contexts, this information may be implicit, but more often it is helpful to make it explicit. Thus for example there is no sensible interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam (*simpliciter*); instead, what is sensible would be interreligious dialogue between *particular* (or particular groups of) Christians and Muslims and even then with critical scrutiny for how the dialogue may already be framed by social or political dynamics hidden from view. That way, conceptions of religiosity would be traceable to their contexts of ascription. The descriptions and clarifications of concepts, practices, or institutions achieved at these locations of dialogue may extend beyond those particular times and places (if the times and places bear a family resemblance — genetic or functional), but then again, they may well not. The situatedness (within different landscapes) of particular standpoints may affect the dynamics of conversation and comparison.

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[12] I am grateful to the editors for helpful commentary on this point.

But there are resources in Wittgenstein's corpus for addressing circumstances like these. If, as Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (Wittgenstein 2003, 49), then any time one encounters conceptual confusion about the application of a term, like "religion", one can conduct conceptual investigation (perhaps aided by genealogical investigation). Clarification of differences of meaning can then help one avoid equivocation and (perhaps just as problematic) the erosion of trust that can stem from one party being misinterpreted. Future study connecting the circumstances of ascriptions of religion with research on Wittgenstein and aspect-seeing (and in particular, the role of the will in imagination) would be helpful as it might aid in construction of a Wittgensteinian ethics of interpretation suitable for addressing conceptual confusion in diverse social contexts.[13] The history of use of "religion" suggests that future use of the term will involve both ascription and withdrawal of ascription of religion-status, that this will be open to debate, both over evidence and the hermeneutical adequacy of ascriptions of the term.

To do otherwise risks participating in the reification of religions, the reinforcement of the obscuring idea that there is a *sui generis* essence to religion that two particular actors automatically enjoy if they happen to identify with one religion or another. In addition, such reification about religion also creates the possibility for reification about particular religious traditions. Theologians or pundits at times participate in this essentializing of traditions (or border constructions between traditions), but the role of the philosopher — at least in the Wittgensteinian sense — is to describe in an illuminating way the similarities and differences between instances of language use or social practice. Thus, what applies to the predicate "is

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[13] In connection with this point, I am grateful to the editors for drawing my attention to the work of Day and Krebs 2010 and Mulhall 1990.

religious" also applies to predicates like "is Christian" or "is Buddhist."[14] In a Wittgensteinian vein, it is not the business of the philosopher to decide who or what belongs to these categories; that job falls to pundits or theologians. In describing the contours of existing and historical language use, philosophers can show how interreligious communication is not just one kind of interreligious encounter but is instead that which may happen in particular times and places, framed by local conceptions of what religion is. Neglect of these landscape features of conversations over boundaries of difference may only issue in more confusion and thoughtless reification of another's tradition as well as one's own. Given the importance of mutually clarifying communication between those who may identify or be identified as religious for living well in our diverse and crowded world, that would be a missed opportunity.[15]

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[14] See Harrison (2006, 148-149) for more on family resemblances within religious traditions.

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