



Functional and Substantive Definitions of Religion

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A *functional* definition of religion is based on what religion does and how it operates 'in terms of its place in the social/psychological system.'¹ This means that the focus is on the instrumental role of religion. This can pertain to the social function of religion for group coherence, social order, defense of group interests, etc. It can also pertain to the psychological functions of religion by providing stories, symbols & rituals that will help individuals to identify with role models, be motivated, find consolation, provide answers to existential questions, etc.

Functional definitions are very common and can be categorized as sociological or psychological in nature. Psychological functional definitions are based on the way religions plays a role in the mental and emotional lives of believers while sociological functional definitions deal with the way religion influences society. In a functionalist approach of the focus is on how through its symbols, rituals, beliefs and practices religion provides 'tools' for believers to act upon and interpret the world. If we take Emile Durkheim's definition for example, we can see that the focus in this definition is very much on the instrumental dimension of religion. He defined religion as 'a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.'² This is a functional definition of religion because Durkheim places focus on the *social* aspects of beliefs and practices that come with religion; it is a focus on what religion *does*. In his work Durkheim placed emphasis on the sacred instead of the supernatural or transcendent in religion, meaning that anything deemed highly valuable by a group can be considered sacred, and it is exactly this sacredness that can take on a religious character without necessarily being related to supernatural phenomena.

Robert Bellah also attempted to capture the nature of religion from a functionalist perspective; he said that 'religion is a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the

¹ Berger, Peter L. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13.2 (1974): 125. Web. p126.

² Durkheim, Émile, and Robert N. Bellah. *Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society, Selected Writings*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1973. Print.

ultimate condition of his existence.’³ In addition, Clifford Geertz provided a more complex definition of religion as;

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁴

This definition attempts to be a little more specific in order to prevent including everything into its definition. It also highlights Geertz’s view of religion as a dimension of culture.

The definitions discussed above all define religion in terms of what it does and the function it has for individuals, society, or both. Examples of what a functional definition includes are ‘meaning complexes such as nationalism, or revolutionary faiths,...or any number of new “life-styles” with their appropriate cognitive and normative legislations.’⁵ These examples listed by Berger reflect that different objects, symbols, or movements can be considered sacred and take on a religious character that plays a role in social and/or psychological aspects of life.

However, as briefly touched upon when discussing the definition of Geertz, a problem with a functional definition of religion is that it can be too inclusive and therefore can hamper distinguishing between religion and other phenomena. As Berger states, the risk with a functional definition is that the ‘religious phenomenon is “flattened out.”’⁶ This shows that these definitions can be applied to almost any system of belief, religious or not, and therefore it is important to apply the definition in terms of social or psychological functions that ‘can be understood without reference to transcendence.’⁷ Despite this drawback, functional definitions do provide certain insights and ideas when used to understand and describe religion.

Now, a substantive definition entails defining religion ‘in terms of its believed contents.’⁸ This includes meanings that refer to ‘transcendent entities in the conventional sense’ such as God and supernatural beings and things. Substantive definitions can also be referred to as *essential* definitions.⁹ In a substantive approach to religion, it is the content and

³ Bellah, Robert N. “Religious Evolution.” *American Sociological Review* 29 (1964) p358.

⁴ Geertz, Clifford. “Religion as a Cultural System.” *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. New York: Praeger. (1966) p4.

⁵ Berger, Peter L. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13.2 (1974): 125. Web. p128.

⁶ Berger, Peter L. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13.2 (1974): 125. Web. p129. “The greyness is the secularized view of reality in which many manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p125.

⁹ Ibid. p128.

“essence” that characterize a religion. What religions share, according to this approach are certain patterns in the essence or content of all religious systems but not any non-religious world views. An early definition exemplifying a substantive view of religions comes from E.B. Tylor who defined it simply as ‘the belief in supernatural beings.’¹⁰ In this conception, religion is something extraordinary, special that has a symbolic and supernatural meaning to people. The definition of religion as stated by Herbert Spencer supports this as well; he said that ‘religion is the recognition that all things are manifestations of a Power which transcends our knowledge.’¹¹ All of these substantive definitions share the idea of content or essence that people can hang on to and believe in, most commonly the belief in supernatural beings or powers.

The greatest drawback to substantive definitions is that they are too universal; not all religious systems necessarily include spiritual beings and not all people who believe in spiritual beings necessarily adhere to a specific religious system. In a way the disadvantages of a substantive definition of religion include that it ignores some of the critical aspects of religion that are covered by functional definitions and vice versa. Functional definitions are too inclusive, while substantive definitions cannot be universal. In order to provide a simple overview of the characteristics of both definitions, the following chart consists of the main bullet points discussed for each definition.

Characteristic	Functional	Substantive
What it is based on	What religion does and how it operates in terms of its place in the social/psychological system	What the content and essence of religion is
What it includes	<i>Psychological</i> : the way religion plays a role in the mental and emotional lives of believers <i>Sociological</i> : the way religion influences society	Religion as a type of philosophy to live by that exists separately from our social or psychological lives
What it relies on	Symbolic rituals, beliefs and practices The sacred instead of the supernatural	The belief in supernatural and transcendental
Examples	Nationalism, revolutionary faith, social symbols or movements	God, gods, supernatural beings and things
Drawbacks	Too inclusive; they prevent from distinguishing between religion and other phenomena	Too universal; they are general enough to apply to multiple religions

¹⁰ E B Tylor

¹¹ Herbert Spencer

The chart is very clear-cut, but unfortunately this does not always match the complex and often ambivalent social reality. The chart is useful to provide an overview of some of the main points where functional and substantive views of religion differ, but it is important to note that there are more details that can be taken into consideration when labelling an example as portraying a certain view of religion. In practice, both in common parlance and in scholarly approaches, people often combine substantive and functional elements in their understanding or evaluation of what religion is and does. In general, presentday religious studies take the view that while there are no universal traits that all religions share, e.g. the belief in a supernatural or transcendent power or being, it is of utmost importance to understand what religion means to people adhering to a specific religion by investigating what it is they believe in, what the meaning of religious practice is to them. Once we have an understanding of what the substance of their religious beliefs and practices is to people, we proceed to study the functional meaning of religion: what effects do the religious practices and beliefs have on their motivations, actions and attitudes? In other words, we study what religion does without explaining religion away.